

Roman Catholic Army Chaplains During the First World War : Roles, Experiences and Dilemmas

by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation seeks to examine the role and actions of the Roman Catholic clergy from Britain who served as military chaplains during the First World War, including the external influences and pressures that may have contributed to their behaviour. In doing so it will look at international themes relating to the Catholic Church as a transnational body as well as the more national and parochial issues that were unique to the status of the faith in the different combatant nations included in the study. While Catholicism was very much a minority religion in the British Isles during the 1914-1919 war, it has been argued that the faith came out of the conflict with its reputation enhanced. This has often been put down to the actions of the Catholic chaplains at the 'sharp end', or most dangerous part, of the battlefield. This dissertation will re-examine a number of the themes that have been presented in previous academic works as having provided the evidence for such an assertion. While finding substantive evidence to support a number of the claims (including the advantages bestowed on the RC chaplains by the nature of the Catholic landscape in many of the key battlegrounds, as well as the importance of the delivery of the Sacraments), it will also argue that the more aggressive attitude and role of the 'home' clergy in France and Belgium was to have a significant influence on the British chaplains. Furthermore, it will be argued that some of the reasons previously given for the behaviour of the RC chaplains, and particularly those with regard to their class and ethnicity, are misleading and in need of further serious examination.

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INTRODUCTION

On 4th August 1914 Britain joined a conflict that has been described as the first global war. Millions played an active part, and catering for the spiritual needs of soldiers of all faiths placed unprecedented demands on the services of Army chaplains from across the combatant nations. Thousands of priests would ultimately swap their vestments for military uniforms and there was a huge increase in the number of chaplains of all denominations, not least among the Roman Catholics.¹ The Catholic Church in Britain had continually pressed its case for greater clerical representation to the Government, claiming that Catholic soldiers were more dependent than their comrades of other faiths on the provision of Sacraments that could only be delivered by a priest. These appeals did not fall on deaf ears and even Margot Asquith, the wife of the Prime Minister, urged the political leader of the nation to “give them their priests”.² Cardinal Bourne, the head of the Catholic Church in Britain, would ultimately be in a position to claim that while Catholic soldiers never accounted for more than 15 per cent of the Army's fighting force, their chaplains never accounted for less than 25 per cent of the clergy in military service.³ The Catholic writer Father Charles Plater went even further in boasting that as a percentage of the population there were more Catholics served in the First World War than representatives of any other denomination.⁴ This latter claim is difficult to substantiate, but there can be little doubt that the Catholic soldiers who took part in the First World War were very well served in proportionate terms by their chaplains. (Indeed, it is worth noting that at the start of the war, in August 1914, there had been just 17 RC Army chaplains, yet by August 1918 this figure had risen to 643).⁵

In addition to this higher profile in the Armed Forces, the Roman Catholic Church in Britain enjoyed an increase in membership both during the years of fighting and after the guns had fallen silent.⁶ This was particularly true in traditional Catholic strongholds such as urban areas: for example, the figures for church attendance in Hulme in Manchester show a rise in worshippers from 47 per cent to 60 per cent in the years immediately following the Armistice (though worth noting that ongoing Irish immigration may have played a part in this).⁷ This situation was, however, by no means inevitable; while there was a large increase in the number of people attending churches of all denominations at the outbreak of the First World War - as they prayed for peace, victory or the safe deliverance of loved ones - Roman Catholicism is among a minority of faiths that sustained this

¹ This from the 'Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire During the Great War', (London: HMSO, 1922) in Snape, M., *God and the British Soldier: Religion and the British Army in the First and Second World Wars*, (Routledge London, 2005), p.89-90

² Bennet, D., *Margot: A Life of the Countess of Oxford and Asquith*, (London, 1984), pp.236-237

³ Rafferty, O., 'Catholic Chaplains to the British Forces in the First World War', *Religion, State & Society*, Vol.39, No.1, (Routledge, March 2011), p.36

⁴ Plater, C., *A Letter To A Catholic Soldier*, (Catholic Social Guild Leaflets, no.6, 1916), p.1

⁵ 'Statistics of the Military Effort...' in Snape, M., (2005), p.89-90

⁶ Snape, MF. and Parker SG., 'Keeping Faith and Coping: Belief Popular Religiosity and the British People' in J. Bourne, P. Liddle, and I. Whitehead (eds), *The Great World War 1914-45: The People's Experience*, (London: Harper Collins, 2001), p.398

⁷ Fielding, S., *Class and Ethnicity: Irish Catholics in England 1880-1939*, (Buckingham, 1993), p.50

upward trend throughout.⁸ It is, as such, hardly surprising that, as the historian Snape has stated, the conflict has often been regarded as “a 'good' war for British Catholicism”.⁹

The aim of this dissertation is to examine a number of specific issues that have arisen in relation to the Roman Catholic Church and its military chaplains in the Great War, including the part the chaplains played on the battlefields and how this may have helped in their faith's post-war boom. (For example, Catholic newspaper *The Tablet* estimated that the RC chaplains played a part, either as the result of pro-active recruitment, or more indirectly because of the example they set on the field of combat, in 40,000 conversions to their faith on the Western Front throughout the course of the war.)

¹⁰ It is therefore my intention to look at the existing literature as well as primary and secondary sources in order to better understand the role of the Catholic chaplains and test the validity of the most common claims that have been made about their actions, experiences and motivations in the conflict.

While there is a large and established body of work addressing the major social, political, economic and military themes of the 1914 war, the amount of work covering relevant religious issues and the impact on the established Christian faiths remains comparatively small; though growing.¹¹ This is particularly true when it comes to the Roman Catholic Church. Even works looking specifically at the themes of religion, conflict and/or Catholicism have often tended to deal with the issue of the Great War in somewhat broad strokes,¹² with a considerable amount of study dealing with the experiences of Catholics living on the Continent or in Ireland.¹³ This said, there have of course been academic works that have provided a very useful perspective for British Roman Catholics: not least a comprehensive study presented in 2002 by Snape that looked at Catholic attitudes and reactions to the war on both the home-front and in the trenches and a work by Schweitzer in 2003 that addressed the experiences of Catholics soldiers, officers and chaplains serving in the Forces.¹⁴ At a more parochial level, historians such as Hegarty and Davies have been completing work looking at Catholics in specific regional centres, such as Leeds and Liverpool.¹⁵

⁸ Currie, R., Gilbert, A., and Horsley, L., *Churches and Churchgoers: Patterns of Church Growth in the British Isles Since 1700*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), pp.31-32

⁹ Snape, M., 'British Catholicism and the British Army in the First World War', *Recusant History*, Vol.26, No.2, (October 2002), p.314

¹⁰ Leonard, J., *The Catholic Chaplaincy, in Ireland and the First World War*, (ed) Fitzpatrick, D., (Dublin: Trinity History Workshop, 1986), p.13

¹¹ See, for example, Brown, C., *The Death of Christian Britain*, (Routledge, 2001); Gregory, A., *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War*, (Cambridge University Press, 2008); Williams, S., *Religious Belief and Popular Culture in Southwark c.1880-1939*, (Oxford University Press, 1999); Currie, R., Gilbert, A., and Horsley, L., *Churches and Churchgoers: Patterns of Church Growth in the British Isles Since 1700*, (Oxford, 1977); and Wickham, E.R., *Church and People in the Industrial City*, (London, 1957)

¹² See, for example, Burleigh, M., *Earthly Powers: The Conflict Between Religion and Politics from the French Revolution to the Great War*, (Harper, London, 2006); Atkin, N., *Priests, Prelates and People: A History of European Catholicism, 1750 to the Present*, (International Library of Historical Studies, 2003)

¹³ Schaefer, R., *Catholics and the First World War* (Routledge, 2010), looks at the war of propaganda between French and German Catholics; Heilbronner, O., *The Impact and Consequences of the First World War in a Catholic Rural Area*, (Oxford Journals, 2010) uses a community in the Black Forest, Germany, for its case study

¹⁴ Snape, M., 'British Catholicism and the British Army in the First World War', *Catholic Recusant History*, Issue 26, vol.2, (2002); Schweitzer, R., *The Cross and the Trenches: Religious Faith and Doubt Among British and American Great War Soldiers*, (Praeger, Westport, USA, 2003)

¹⁵ Hegarty, J.M., 'The Diocese of Leeds During the First World War', *Northern Catholic History*, Issue 37; Davies, J.,

Most recently, and on the specific issue of Roman Catholic army chaplains, Rafferty published a paper in early 2011 that placed considerable focus on the Sacramental rituals of the Catholic Church and the influence this had on the work of its chaplains in the war: essentially arguing that the main driving force behind the chaplains to often place themselves in areas of danger was the expectation of the Catholic soldiers themselves that they should be able to have access to the Sacraments whenever they most needed it.¹⁶ Loudon and Snape have also provided substantive cross-denominational works on the Army chaplaincy service and the relationship between religion and the British Army during the wars of the twentieth century,¹⁷ while the Anglican chaplains have also been put under scrutiny by the likes of Wilkinson and Parker.¹⁸ All of these titles have looked at the Sacramental role of the Catholic church on the battlefield, as well as other common themes such as the class backgrounds of the chaplains, the infrastructure of the chaplaincy service itself and the pressures placed on the Christian faiths, and their servants, to adhere to the war cause. They have also touched, to varying degrees, on the claim of various popular war authors that the Catholic chaplains were more often in the front-line than their counterparts from other faiths. Johnstone and Hegarty, who wrote an extensive and thoroughly-researched study of the roles of Roman Catholic military chaplains from the Crusades to the Second World War,¹⁹ have also addressed this theme, although the authors do appear to have made the decision in their work not to become too embroiled in contemporary and ongoing academic debates about the chaplains or the external factors that may have influenced their individual actions.

All of the above works have contributed hugely to the understanding of the Royal Army Chaplaincy and the chaplains themselves in the Great War. Nevertheless, it is my intention to re-examine some key points of past debates and to question their validity, while also raising some new issues in need of further investigation, particularly concerning the influence of Continental priests on the battlefield. To do this I will be using the memoirs, diaries and letters of a number of Catholic priests who served as chaplains during the war; men who came from different backgrounds and different parts of the country. I have also been lucky to gain access to previously unpublished material, such as the diary of a Catholic chaplain who served on the Western Front, and the biographical details of further RC chaplains courtesy of the Catholic diocesan archives in Brentford, Salford and Lancaster. As we have seen from statistics already mentioned, by the end of the Great War there were more than 643 priests on military service, but it should be noted that most chaplains (though not all) served for a limited tour of duty before returning to home responsibilities; meaning

'War Is A Scourge: The First Year Of The Great War 1914-1915: Catholics And Pastoral Guidance', *North West Catholic History Society*, (2011)

¹⁶ Rafferty, O., 'Catholic Chaplains to the British Forces in the First World War', *Religion, State & Society*, Vol.39, No.1, (Routledge, March 2011,)

¹⁷ *God and the British Soldier*, Snape, M., (2005); Loudon, S., *Chaplains in Conflict: The Role of Army Chaplains Since 1914*, (Avon Books, London, 1996)

¹⁸ *God and the British Soldier*, Snape, M., (2005); Parker, L., *The Whole Armour of God: Anglican Army Chaplains in the Great War*, (Helion, Midlands, 2009); Wilkinson, A., *The Church of England and the First World War*, (London, 1996); Marrin, A., *The Last Crusade: The Church of England in the First World War*, (University Press, 1974); Schweitzer, R., *The Cross and the Trenches...* (1964)

¹⁹ Johnstone, T., and Hegarty, J., *The Cross on the Sword*, (Chapman, London, 1996)

that there were actually more than 800 who played an active role from the start of the war to its conclusion. On this basis, it is hard to say how many chaplains' experiences it would take to make a truly representative study. Nevertheless, I am satisfied that there is enough evidence presented from enough different chaplains to support the arguments as they are given.

As mentioned, I have used a large amount of material from Catholic archives. It has always been my intention to provide a study that is representative of the backgrounds and experiences of RC chaplains from around the British Isles, although the geographic base of the author (in Lancashire, England) may have resulted at times in a bias towards the archives of northern England. However, I am satisfied from the evidence that I have gathered from outside of this area (including a study of a select group of RC military chaplains from Essex) that this has not resulted in a radically different picture to the one that may have been created if the study had been focussed on another part of the country. While the majority of the material has come from the Catholic archives serving the Diocese of Salford and Lancaster, these archives also included Bishops' letters and encyclicals from around the country. In addition, where possible I have always tried to use material from a national Catholic newspaper (such as *The Tablet* or *Herald*) as a reference over a local offering, although it would appear that much of the material that appeared in individual diocesan publications was often syndicated and would have appeared in similar titles around Britain.

Finally, it should be pointed out that most of the international comparisons made within this work concentrate almost exclusively on French, British and German perspectives, with examples from Belgium used where possible and where key to the debate. This decision was taken as these were the three nations who endured the full four years of the conflict, unlike, for example, the Russians who surrendered in 1917 and the Americans who did not make a significant battlefield contribution until after the Russians had already departed. Furthermore, in a dissertation about British Roman Catholic military chaplains it is impossible to ignore the fact that more than half of the total number of Roman Catholic clergy in uniform (389 from 651 at the time of the Armistice) were deployed on the Western Front and, as such, it should be unsurprising that most of their accounts relate to their actions and experiences from this theatre of the war. I have also decided against using material relating to the RC Naval chaplains, of whom there were 41, as their experiences and duties were very different to those of the clergy serving with the Army (which, for most of the war, also encompassed the Royal Flying Corps).

In the opening chapter I will be looking at the kind of pressures that resulted from the international nature of Roman Catholicism. The Vatican's attempts at brokering peace during the conflict were wholly unsuccessful and at times proved highly compromising to Catholics from both sides of the trenches who were striving to display loyalty to their national cause. This issue of national fidelity was complex in the British Isles, with the Irish and English Catholic hierarchies at loggerheads over the major issue of control of recruitment (the Irish Bishops' believed they should have the main voice as they claimed most of the Catholic soldiers fighting were Irish).²⁰ Questions

²⁰ *The Cross on the Sword*, Johnstone, T., and Hegarty, J., (1996)

about Irish loyalty were further compounded by the Easter Rising in 1916 and the Irish bishops rejection of conscription, both of which had the potential to further alienate Catholics from the mainstream in the British Isles. These are topics that have generated considerable interest among Irish historians ²¹ and I have not, as such, added them to the remit of this work. Instead, it is my intention to look at the compromises faced by Roman Catholics and their chaplains as a result of the faith's strength across so many different combatant nations. Catholics found themselves confronting enemies who worshipped at the same table, shared the same beliefs and ultimately took orders from the same master. How did Catholics whose nations and men were at war deal with this and how did the events on the battlefields of Catholic Belgium and France (events that resulted in a huge influx of Catholic refugees) influence the behaviour of the British Catholics and their military chaplains?

The second chapter of the dissertation will look at one of the most oft-repeated stereotypes of British Catholic chaplains in the First World War: that of their class background. As we will see, the majority of academic and popular history writers commonly refer to the Catholic chaplains as having been 'working class' by birth and of also having had more experience of dealing with the working classes in their clerical work. The issue of social ministering and slum parishes is one that has been studied extensively over the years and this material provides good evidence that can be used in helping to determine whether or not Catholic chaplains were more active in this field. ²² Limited case studies have also been undertaken by the like of Davies ²³ and the author of this work (courtesy of diocesan clergy lists) in a bid to identify the backgrounds of specific groups of Catholic chaplains. Furthermore, the evidence presented by the contemporary correspondence and literature of Catholic chaplains who were working at the Front, such as that by the likes of Monsignor Bickerstaff-Drew, has also been influential. ²⁴

The inference from the working-class prefix attached to the Catholic chaplains is that they enjoyed an advantage in their dealings with the average soldier or 'Tommy', who is also generally accepted as having been of working-class stock. However, such assumptions about the class of the Army in the First World War throw up interesting questions in their own right, with the likes of Gregory, Simkins and Holmes among the historians to have addressed them. ²⁵ Loudon has also written about military chaplains, the demands placed upon them and with whom they had most

²¹ See for example Youseff, T., 'British Catholic Response to the Irish Conscription Controversy', *Journal of Church and State*, (2006); *The Cross on the Sword*, Johnstone, T., and Hegarty, J., (1996); O'Fiaich, T., 'The Irish bishops and the conscription issue', *The Capuchin Annual*, (1968), pp. 351–68; Rafferty, O., *Catholicism in Ulster 1603–1983: An Interpretative History*, (Gill and Macmillan, Dublin, 1994)

²² See for example *Earthly Powers*, Burleigh, M., (2005); *English Churches...*, Cox, J., (1982); Parsons, G., *Religion in Victorian Britain IV*, (Manchester University Press, 1989); Norman, E., *The English Catholic Church in the Nineteenth Century* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1985)

²³ Davies, J., 'Catholic Families Produce Catholic Priests: Roman Catholic priests, social class and family background in the late 19th and early 20th centuries', (paper presented to a joint conference of the Preston branch of the Institute of Local and Family History and the *North West Catholic History Society*, Saturday, November 20, 2010, University of Central Lancashire, UK)

²⁴ Bickerstaffe-Drew, F., *John Ayscough's Letters to his Mother 1914-1916*, (Chatto & Windus, London, 1919)

²⁵ See, for example, Holmes, R., *Tommy: The British Soldier on the Western Front*, (Harper Collins, London, 2004); Simkins, P., *Kitchener's Army: The Raising of the New Armies 1914-1916*, (Manchester University Press, 1997); and Gregory, A., *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War*, (Cambridge University Press, 2008)

contact.²⁶ The latter is particularly important when it comes to the placement and day-to-day roles of the chaplains: some were with predominantly single faith battalions and others were not. This raises issues of different ethnic experiences, with those chaplains who were not with Irish or 'Catholic' battalions facing a very different experience to those who were. It is my intention to look at these discrepancies.

In the final chapter I plan to address the most contentious part of the debate when it comes to traditional perceptions of the legacy of military chaplains in the war: this being that the Anglicans were generally out-performed by their Catholic counterparts both in practical and spiritual terms. It is a legacy that was often enforced in no small part by the Church of England itself, which could be highly self-critical in its analysis of its performance both during and after the war.²⁷ However, it is the literature that came from the trenches that was undoubtedly to have the biggest influence on the way that the First World War chaplains were to be judged for posterity. Many of the most widely-read biographies and memoirs of the war were often scathing about military chaplains, but usually came with an addendum exempting the Roman Catholics.²⁸ Robert Graves, for example, infamously said of the Anglican chaplains: "...had (they) shown one-tenth of the courage, endurance and other human qualities that regimental doctors showed the British Expeditionary Force might well have started a religious revival. But they had not, being under orders to avoid the fighting. Soldiers could hardly respect a chaplain who obeyed these orders, and not yet one in 50 seemed sorry to obey them... the Roman Catholic chaplains were not only permitted to visit posts of danger but definitely enjoyed to be where the fighting was, so that they could give extreme unction to the dying."²⁹

These kind of comments were widely repeated in many accounts of the period and are aired with uncontested regularity in much of the modern literature about the war. In academic terms, such claims have sparked an Anglican response, with Linda Parker among the most recent to review the role of the Church of England chaplains and put forward a strong argument in defence of their actions.³⁰ It is not my intention to make comparisons between the Catholic military chaplains and those of other faiths, although at times the Anglican and non-conformist perspective may be addressed where it is helpful in putting the Catholic experience into context. The chaplains of different faiths often had different objectives, motivations, outside influences and pressures. In the case of the Catholic chaplains it is important to look at Sacramental demands and the part played by their fellow Catholic chaplains from Belgium and France. The question also has to be asked about whether being in more forward areas was always the best place for them to be, especially when the experiences of the First World War must have played a part in influencing the decision of the Catholic authorities to limit the forward role of their chaplains to Advanced Dressing Stations in the

²⁶ *Chaplains in Conflict...*, Loudon, S., (1996)

²⁷ See for example *The Army and Religion Report of 1919* (Macmillan & Co, London, 1919) looking, essentially, at the Church of England's performance in the Great War and what lessons could be learnt from it

²⁸ See, for example, Sassoon, S., *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, (Faber & Faber, London, 1930); Graves, R., *Goodbye To All That*, (Penguin, London, 1929), Blunden, E., *Undertones of War*, (Penguin, London, 1928); and Chapman, G., *A Passionate Prodigality*, (Nicholson and Watson, London, 1933)

²⁹ *Goodbye To All That*, Graves, R., (1929), p.158

³⁰ *The Whole Armour of God...*, Parker, L., (2009)

Second World War.³¹

Ultimately, it is hoped that this dissertation will provide some new points of discussion in what, to date, has been a rather limited debate about Catholicism and Roman Catholic chaplains in the Great War. It is also hoped that it may provide a useful starting point for future research into such specific themes as the class and ethnicity of the Catholic clergy in the war and the influence of the foreign Catholic chaplains on their British counterparts.

³¹ *Chaplains in Conflict...*, Loudon, S., (1996), p.51

CHAPTER 1

National and International Pressures and Advantages

Introduction:

At the time of the Great War Roman Catholicism was the only truly unified transnational Christian movement in the world. Indeed, the Anglicans of the Church of England were often at pains to stress the factional nature of Protestantism in a bid to distance themselves from the German 'Lutheran' wing of their faith during the conflict.¹ Furthermore, this distinction between Lutheran and Anglican forms of Protestantism seems to have been widely accepted, with examples of editors from British Catholic publications even referring to the German invaders of Belgium in 1914 as "Protestant Martin Lutheran soldiers".²

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to believe that the Roman Catholic Church was not without its own dilemmas. The war resulted in Catholics taking up arms against fellow Catholics, forcing them into awkward choices between international commitment to their religion and loyalty to their nation State. The main combatants on the Western Front had all endured uneasy, if not fraught, modern histories within their own borders. The anti-Catholic traditions of the Prussian house of Hohenzollern, combined with the importance of Protestantism to the subsequent formation of the German Reich, all but forced German Catholics to the fringes of society.³ In France, a virile and often vicious form of anti-clericalism had been in the ascendant both politically and socially since the birth of the Republic.⁴ Roman Catholicism was in a far healthier state in Britain in 1914 than in France and Germany, although its turbulent history of reformation and recusancy was fresh in the minds of the masses and anti-Catholicism remained common.⁵ While cross-border generalisations about the psyche and behaviour of Catholic adherents across these three combatant nations are, as such, dangerous, what is clear is that all had something to gain from successful participation in the war: here was their chance to show national allegiance and dispel lingering doubts about their commitment to their host countries in relation to their commitment to Rome.

This opening chapter will look at the dilemmas faced by Catholics with regard to their allegiance to the State and the Holy See in order to create a context in which it is then possible to draw conclusions about the influence internationalism and nationalism had on the actions of the British RC army chaplains who served in the war. Furthermore, it will be necessary to investigate whether or not events affecting other Catholics on the Continent, such as in Belgium, influenced the

¹ Burleigh, M., *Earthly Powers: The Conflict Between Religion and Politics from the French Revolution to the Great War*, (Harper, London, 2006)

² See for example *The Harvest*, No.235, October 1914, (publication of the Salford Catholic Protection and Rescue Society)

³ *Earthly Powers*, Burleigh, M., (2005), pp.415, 445-446

⁴ Ferguson, N., *The Pity of War*, (Penguin: London, 1998), p.208

⁵ Rafferty, O., *Catholicism in Ulster 1603–1983: An Interpretative History*, (Gill and Macmillan, Dublin, 1994), p.284

British chaplains and whether or not they behaved differently towards their enemy if they found them to be fellow Catholics. When looking at the internationalism of Catholicism, it is also necessary to address claims (made by their contemporaries) that the British RC chaplains were at an advantage over their counterparts in what was to prove the main theatre of the war (the Western Front) as a result of the fact that the native French and Flemish population were principally of a Catholic persuasion.⁶

i. Nationalism:

As stated, the Great War gave Catholics a chance to strengthen their position within their nation States. German Catholics can only have been encouraged in the weeks leading up to the war as the impending conflict succeeded in bringing a previously unimaginable level of acceptance: at an interdenominational service (itself a hitherto unheard of occurrence) in front of the Reichstag in Berlin in the week that war was declared Protestant and Catholic hymns were sung in unity by all.⁷ Furthermore, on the outbreak of war the Kaiser, as supreme Bishop of the Prussian Church, said that he would only recognise 'Germans' from now on rather than previously divisive groupings.⁸ In France, many Catholics felt that the war provided them with a fresh opportunity to forge a reconciliation between the religious and political classes and create an upsurge in religious fervour. Again there were good grounds for early optimism, with the cult of the Sacre flourishing and a marked increase in pilgrimages to the likes of Lourdes, Pontmain and La Salette.⁹ The French Catholic priest Rene Gaell was filled with optimism when war started, stating: "The love of our country and the love of God so long separated were now as one. It was no longer time to scoff or be indifferent to religion, people now wrung us by the hand and came close up to us."¹⁰

In Britain the Catholic Church did not experience the same sense of rejuvenation, mainly because British Catholics were no longer as isolated in their own homeland. Many may have felt a sense of gratitude when they compared their recent dealings with the British Government to those of their counterparts on mainland Europe: changes to the law in the nineteenth century, including such moves as state funding for schools, had brought Catholics in from the margins of society.¹¹ In fact, when it came to confronting the charges of 'Popism' and Roman allegiance to appear "more patriotic than thou", it was British Catholics who were often to prove the most undeviating.¹² This was a considerable achievement given the more complicated position many British Catholics were faced

⁶ See for example Rider, R.J., *Reflections on the Battlefield: From Infantryman to Chaplain 1914-1919*, Robinson, A, and Hair, P., (eds), (Liverpool University Press, 2001), p.144

⁷ *The Pity of War*, Ferguson, N., (1998), p.207

⁸ *Earthly Powers*, Burleigh, M., (2005), pp.415, 438

⁹ Ferguson, N., *The Pity of War*, (Penguin: London, 1998), p.208

¹⁰ Gaell, R., translated by Gibbs, H., and Berton, M., *Priests in the Firing Line*, (Longmans, Green and Co, London, 1916), p.3

¹¹ Snape, M., 'British Catholicism and the British Army in the First World War', *Recusant History*, Vol. 26, No.2), October 2002), p.316

¹² Mews, S., 'The Effects of the First World War on English Religious Life', MA Thesis, (University of Leeds, 1967), p.132

with as a result of their dependence on Continental clergy in order to adequately staff their churches. In the case of one of the largest Catholic populations in England (the Salford Diocese in Lancashire) it can be seen from the clergy lists that at the time of the war the background of the priests who were serving this population could be broken down into roughly one third Continental, one third Irish and one third English.¹³ Three of the clergy were of German or Austrian descent, which posed an obvious problem: Rev Reichart was on holiday in Austria when war broke out and, forced to remain overseas, he died in 1920 having been unable to get back from the place of his birth to the English parish he had served (St Mary's at Heaton Norris) for 31 years; Father Bruning, who had been born in Germany and was acting as a parish priest in Burnley, Lancashire, was sent to the USA because of the threat of internment; while Father Hohn, who had also been born in Germany, was unable to escape internment and was duly sent to the Isle of Man in 1915 and not released until hostilities were over.¹⁴ It was a situation that must have caused considerable heartache to Father Hohn's great friend and Bishop, Louis Charles Casartelli. A true European who spoke seven European languages, the Bishop of Salford's roots were in Italy and some of his closest personal friends came from the Continent.¹⁵ On the same day that the leading English Catholic, Cardinal Bourne, was telling a parade of troops that there would be no question of their fighting being anything but justified in religious terms, Casartelli was at a gathering with the Lord Mayor of Manchester advocating sympathetic treatment of Germans residents in the city following public demonstrations against them.¹⁶ Nevertheless, as we will see, it is wrong to assume that the more conciliatory approach of men like Casartelli resulted in a lack of commitment to the national cause.

It has been claimed that while the British Roman Catholic Church was supportive of the war, it was far less vocal in its pro-war propaganda than the Church of England and that senior members of the RC Church rarely took part in public political debate about the conflict, particularly in the national press.¹⁷ This may be something of a misnomer, for while British Catholicism was stronger than it had been for centuries, it should not be forgotten that it remained a minority voice when it came to the issue of religion and State. So, when the King announced that he was giving up alcohol in March 1915 for the duration of the conflict (following widespread reports of drunkenness in the Army) it was the Archbishop of Canterbury who was seen to take up the clarion call by issuing a public statement urging the nation to follow the monarch's lead. Far less publicised (presumably for being far less newsworthy) was the fact that the statement was also signed by Cardinal Bourne and the President of the Free Church Council.¹⁸ Likewise, when the Government needed more workers in the fields in 1917 to help increase food supplies, it was arranged for the Archbishop of Canterbury to have a letter printed in the press saying that in the country's time of need the Christians of Britain could do fieldwork on Sundays with a clear conscience. Once again Cardinal Bourne issued a similar

¹³ Clergy lists at Salford Diocesan Archive 1900-1914

¹⁴ Clergy lists at Salford Diocesan Archive 1914-1923

¹⁵ Broadley, MJ., *Louis Charles Casartelli: A Bishop in Peace and War*, (Koinonia, Bury, Lancashire, 2003), p.131

¹⁶ *The Tablet*, 15 August 1914

¹⁷ Wilkinson, A., *The Church of England and the First World War*, (SPCK London, 1978), p.2

¹⁸ *The Church of England...*, Wilkinson, A., (1978), p.102

ruling on behalf of Roman Catholics, but like so many of the Catholic pronouncements it was to gain far more column inches in the popular Catholic newspapers, such as *The Tablet* and *Catholic Herald*, than a national press that was unsurprisingly more concerned with the position of the spiritual leader and temporal head of the State religion.

Claims of a Catholic reticence to 'go public' in support of the nation's militaristic commitment can also be countered by a cursory glance at the Catholic newspapers and encyclicals of the period. A continual stream of articles were published by leading British Catholics speaking in support of the war, with Cardinal Bourne, for example, reported in 1915 as having taken great satisfaction at the number of Catholics who had so far donned uniform.¹⁹ The Archbishop of Birmingham, Edward Illsley, wrote in his Pastoral Letter of Lent 1916 that: "Patriotism is part of our very religion. It is a duty which is second only to that which we owe to God Himself."²⁰ Bishop John Cuthbert Hedley of Newport added: "The great duty that everyone owes to the country when the country is at war is to help it to success and victory."²¹ Even the great European Bishop Casartelli felt a sense of gratitude that so many men from his diocese had answered their country's call.²² When his own Godson joined up the Bishop wrote: "I cannot say that I regret or disapprove in any way of your joining the Forces in the 'Good Cause'... go on, do your duty, and get the VC!"²³

Among those who were determined to 'do their bit' were members of Bishop Casartelli's own clergy, including Father Henry C. Day, who was serving at the Holy Name parish in central Manchester. The Jesuit was so keen to enlist he approached the Lord Mayor of Manchester to support his case to achieve a quick placement with a battalion bound for overseas' service.²⁴ Still, few can have been as keen or vocal about the war as the controversial Catholic priest Father Bernard Vaughan. In a somewhat typical week at the start of the war, in September 1914, he spoke at recruitment meetings at Knaresborough, Harrogate, Hull and Leeds. At the Knaresborough meeting he stated: "How could any man die more splendidly than by laying down his life for his friends and brothers. There must not be a man capable of carrying arms but who must give his name."²⁵ In the ensuing years Vaughan was to go further than all of his Catholic, and most of his Anglican, counterparts in the bloodthirsty nature of his jingoism; in one instance stating that it is "our business to keep on killing Germans".²⁶

The evidence seems to suggest that claims of reticence among British Catholics to support the national cause are unfounded, although it is easy to see how, in such a climate, the internationalism of the Roman Catholic Church was put under considerable pressure by the weight of patriotic fervour. Nevertheless, as we will see later in this chapter, there were plenty of instances, both on and

¹⁹ *The Tablet*, 24 July 1915

²⁰ Pastoral Letter Lent 1916 of Archbishop Edward Illsley, 'Christian Patriotism', Birmingham Archdiocesan Archives

²¹ *Louis Charles Casartelli...*, Broadley, MJ., (2003) p.141

²² *The Catholic Herald*, 9 January 1915

²³ *Louis Charles Casartelli...*, Broadley, MJ., (2003) p.140

²⁴ Day, H.C., SJ, MC., *A Cavalry Chaplain*, (Heath Cranton Ltd, London, 1922), p.16

²⁵ *The Tablet*, 12 September 1914

²⁶ Davies, J., 'Fr Bernard Vaughan S.J and World War 1' in *Obstinate Souls: Essays* presented by the North West Catholic History Society, (ed) Davies, J., and Mitchinson, A., (North West Catholic History Society, 2011), p.79

off the battlefield, to show that it was rarely in danger of full collapse and that the majority of British RC Army Chaplains do not appear to have shared the bellicosity of Father Vaughan.

ii. Internationalism and the Papal position:

An obvious question to address when talking about nationalism is how this new patriotic fervour among the combatant Catholics was accepted by Rome. Clearly it would be extremely difficult, if not inappropriate, for the Vatican to take sides: especially when the machinations of Rome could have unforeseen implications. The Austrians (who were 90 per cent Catholic) embarked upon the First World War with a strong sense of Papal injustice as the Vatican had signed a Concordat with Serbia (removing Austria-Hungary's protectorate rights over Catholics in the Balkan state) just four days before Franz Ferdinand was assassinated. The Austrians felt this decision, albeit unintentionally, had given the Serbians a sense of Papal support in further distancing themselves from the control of the Hapsburg Empire in the run up to the war.²⁷ While the latter may not have had a direct influence on the assassination and circumstances that led to war, they cannot have helped. What is clear is that the opposing Austrians and Serbs felt that the Holy See still exercised considerable moral and political influence, and they were not alone in that view. Both the Allies and Central Powers fought to win unqualified support from the Pope during the war years. All parties sent representatives to Rome in a bid to win favour and a subsequent propaganda coup. Among those beating a path to the door were diplomats from Britain, a country which had not maintained an accredited representative to the Vatican for three centuries. Once again, the message being sent to Catholics and their leaders in the British Isles was that the war was only serving to rebuild and strengthen links between their faith and their nation state.

However, despite the external government pressures and the claims and counter-claims of the warring nations, Pope Benedict XV remained steadfast in his bid to stay true to a position of neutrality. With Catholics taking up arms against Catholics, it could be argued that there was no other stance he could take, but this did not appease the combatants. In fact the Pope's calls for peace were often a source of discomfort for Catholic leaders in different nations. The French and Belgians, for example, were particularly angry at the "Boche Pope" after he called for an end to blockades on Germany which were hurting civilians, and further outraged when he later called for peace without reparations. Allied ire was also incurred when the Pope condemned Italy's entry into the war in 1915. In *The Neutrality of the Holy See*, published by the Catholic Truth Society in 1915, the Catholic Bishop of Northampton felt it necessary to go in to print to justify why the Pope had not spoken out against reported German atrocities in Belgium (including the massacre of innocents and the destruction of historic sites like Louvain, with its churches, university and library), saying to have

²⁷ Atkin, N., and Tallett, F., *Priests, Prelates & People: A History of European Catholicism Since 1750*, (Tauris, London, 2003), p.197

done so would have placed German Catholics in grave danger.²⁸ The Germans, meanwhile, were furious that the Vatican had sent home a number of their delegates from Rome for being too 'warmongering' and that the Pope had chosen to go public in condemning their sinking of the civilian liner the Lusitania in 1915.²⁹

The Holy See did not, of course, have to tread such a fine balancing act when it came to the Middle East and Pope Benedict wrote deplorably of the Turkish massacres of Armenians. He was also on safe ground when dealing with Prisoners of War (PoWs) and made full use of Rome's resources to repatriate severely wounded prisoners, locate missing persons, search for news of the dead, and supply food and medicines to civilians and PoWs. Bishops whose dioceses included a prisoner of war camp were instructed to deploy priests with relevant language skills to tend to the spiritual welfare of the inmates and to facilitate contact with the outside world. The Vatican was to spend more than 82 million lire on relief work, apparently pushing itself to the brink of bankruptcy.³⁰ Despite such obvious good works and an ongoing commitment to peace, there is a sense that Benedict XV's numerous denunciations of the war were, on the whole, a cause of tension and embarrassment to Catholics in Britain and a source of anger to their allies in France and Belgium, not least as British Catholics were acutely aware of cross-channel atrocities in the early stages of the war as a result of the arrival of hundreds of thousands of war refugees .

In a nine-month period, from late August 1914 to early May 1915, it is estimated that 250,000 Belgian refugees arrived in Britain: many were women, children and elderly people in a pitiful condition. Most were dispersed in small groups across the Isles and the vast majority were Catholic.³¹ Such arrivals had a big impact on local communities and appear to have added to the growing sense of public righteousness about the allied/British cause, especially among Catholics. In the history of Christ The King RC Church in Stevenage it is stated that attendances went up considerably when dozens of Belgian refugees were billeted in the town in October 1914: "The refugees had been ordered to leave their homes as the Germans began their attack," it adds with a sense of consternation.³² It was a similar story in the small town of Hyde in Cheshire, which found itself host to 137 Catholic refugees whose plight proved moving enough to bring all faiths together in a bid to house and feed them.³³ In the December 1914 issue of the Salford Diocese publication *The Harvest* translations were provided to help in dealing with refugees, including spiritual tips like 'you will send your children to our Catholic school' and 'we have Mass on Sunday at nine and eleven' as well as practical advice such as 'try to learn English' and 'tell me what you need in the way of clothes for yourself and your children'.³⁴ Monsignor de Wachter of Belgium, the auxiliary Bishop of

²⁸ *The Church of England...*, Wilkinson, A., (1978), p.200

²⁹ *Priests, Prelates...*, Atkin, N., and Tallett, F., (2003), p.197

³⁰ *The Church of England...*, Wilkinson, A., (1978), p.198

³¹ Barrès-Baker, M.C., 'Our Belgian Guests: Refugees in Brent, 1914-1919', *Brent Local History Magazine*, (July/August 2007), pp.14-19:

³² www.stevenage-rc.org.uk/htdocs/information/general/parish_history

³³ from Sidebotham, Hyde, p.13, in Gregory, A., *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War*, (Cambridge University Press, 2008), p.174

³⁴ *The Harvest*, No. 237, December 1914

Malines, was in Britain over Christmas 1914 addressing large assemblies at town halls and cathedrals, while Bishops across Britain appointed priests to work specifically in assisting the refugees arriving in their diocese. This was easier for some more than others, with Father John Higgins, of St Joseph's RC Church in Guildford, one of the more obvious choices as he was able to speak French and Flemish.³⁵

It is worth noting that many of the priests who went on to become army chaplains had first-hand experience of the refugees and close personal ties with Belgium that often resulted in a sense of anger and indignation. This was particularly prevalent among those who had studied for Holy Orders at Louvain, where they had formed friendships and spent cherished time in the famous library and complexes that were now being looted and burnt down by the German invaders. Among the former students of Louvain was Bishop Casartelli, who described the library as the intellectual HQ of Catholicism in Europe. He wrote in his diary: "The most awful news yet received from the war: the German barbarians have destroyed Louvain and all its buildings... it is a nightmare!"³⁶ Father Henry Day wrote: "Belgium's anguish caused a tocsin to be sounded."³⁷ It should also be noted that Anglican publications like *The Church Times* were also regularly reporting on 'the horrors' in Catholic Belgium and stoking up anger among the British faithful. "An incident is recorded in which the aged priest of Pepinster was shot in the public square because he bravely refused to give up the keys of his church to the German commander," it was claimed in one article.³⁸

In his autobiography of the Catholic academic and novelist J.R.R. Tolkien, John Garth makes the popular claim that the situation in Belgium and pitiful reality of the refugees gave many Catholics in Britain in 1914 the feeling that they had a better reason to take up arms than most; the enemy clearly being "Lutheran zealots" who reputedly raped nuns, slaughtered priests and turned innocent Catholic souls out of their homes.³⁹ There were, however, complexities to the situation and the Catholics were in something of a state of denial when it came to accepting that any of the crimes were being committed by their own. In an October 1914 issue of *The Harvest* it was claimed: "The atrocities committed by the Germans in Belgium gave rise to a suspicion that there must have been a motive of religious bigotry and a hatred of everything Catholic in the Prussian soldiers. It is a fact that only Protestant Martin Lutheran soldiers were sent to Belgium during the attacks. Later on in September, Bavarian troops, who are all Catholics, were sent to Brussels, and the result was quarrelling between them and the Prussians and loss of life on both sides. Father Winch, an English priest who was resident in Louvain, confirms the above. He says that the German soldiers sent to Belgium were almost entirely non-Catholics."⁴⁰ What this does demonstrate is that Catholics were prepared to try and make distinctions when it came to the religious backgrounds of their foe, even if the truth is that the German army was a federal institution and in reality such religious distinctions

³⁵ www.stjo-guildford.co.uk/aboutus_history

³⁶ Casartelli Diaries, 29 August 1914, Salford Diocesan Archives

³⁷ *A Cavalry Chaplain*, Day, H.C., (1922), p.15

³⁸ *The Church Times*, August 1914

³⁹ Garth, J., *Tolkien and the Great War*, (Harper Collins, London, 2003), p.41

⁴⁰ *The Harvest*, No. 235, October 1914

among its ranks would have been highly unlikely.

iii. The enemy:

Historian Michael Snape is not alone in claiming that “it was natural for Roman Catholics – with their much stronger sense of being part of a Global church – to feel a particular sympathy for their co-religionists among the enemy”.⁴¹ Indeed, there are plenty of examples among the diaries of British RC Army Chaplains and British RC army officers of a certain generosity of spirit towards the enemy, especially if it involved fellow Catholics.

The Catholic officer Rowland Fielding recorded his men unearthing a number of German bodies during trench repairs near Kemmel in Flanders in February 1917, and the fact that they took particular care of them because they felt it likely the dead men were Catholics. He wrote: “The two dead are Saxons and therefore probably RC, so I have arranged for our chaplain to read the burial service over them.”⁴² (Ironically, Fielding’s religious geography was misplaced, as Saxons were more likely to have been Protestants.) The biographer of Father William Doyle said the Catholic chaplain preached strongly to the men of the 16th Irish Division on a number of occasions about their duty to respect the lives of prisoners.⁴³ Prior to mines being exploded beneath the German trenches in June 1917 on the Messines ridge in Belgium, Father Doyle is said to have climbed out of his trench to give Absolution to the unwitting enemy.⁴⁴ Father Benedict Williamson was also serving in the vicinity of Messines at this time and made a note of the large numbers of Polish soldiers among the enemy’s wounded. He recorded that most were Catholic and that they eagerly received the Sacraments from him.⁴⁵ Senior Catholic military chaplain Monsignor Francis Bickerstaffe-Drew (who published his war letters under the pseudonym of John Ayscough) certainly felt compassion for the foe and wrote in his diary before the major advance at Loos in 1915: “Said Mass this morning asking God to be with our hosts, and especially that we and our French comrades might succeed in taking vast numbers of prisoners who should surrender unhurt.”⁴⁶ He recorded giving Extreme Unction to dying German Catholic prisoners on a number of occasions, including during the very early stages of the war in September 1914.⁴⁷ At a military hospital in Versailles in 1915 he wrote: “I said Mass in my own chapel... eight soldiers came, two Germans. ‘We are brothers here in hospital, all of us,’ I said, ‘but everywhere you are my sons, for I am a priest.’”⁴⁸

If the above seem like the kind of acts of common Christian decency that one might expect from any ‘man of God’, it should be noted that there are plenty of examples to suggest that such

⁴¹ Snape, M., *God and the British Soldier: Religion and the British Army in the First and Second World Wars*, (Routledge London, 2005), p.191

⁴² Fielding, R., *War Letters to a Wife*, (Medici Society, 1929), p.95

⁴³ O’Rahilly, A., *The Padre of Trench Street: Father William Doyle*, (Longmans, Green and Company, London, 1920), p.511

⁴⁴ *The Padre of Trench Street...*, O’Rahilly, A., (1920), p.511

⁴⁵ Williamson, B., *Happy Days in France and Flanders*, Harding & More Ltd, London, 1920), p.13

⁴⁶ Bickerstaffe-Drew, F., *John Ayscough’s Letters to his Mother 1914-1916*, (Chatto & Windus, London, 1919), p.239

⁴⁷ *John Ayscough’s Letters...*, Bickerstaffe-Drew, F., (1919), p.239

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p.127

courtesies were not extended by all; especially the French. When the French Catholic Priest Rene Gael and a number of his fellow diocesan clergymen arrived for enlistment they were gathered together and advised that they would have to administer help where needed. Gael wrote that one of the priests asked “Even the Boches?”, and when this was confirmed he noted that “amongst us there was a hum of dissent”.⁴⁹ Monsignor Bickerstaff-Drew recorded two incidents in 1915 that suggest that the attitude of Gael and his fellow French Catholic clerics was far from uncommon. On March 4 he wrote after holding a service at a church in France: “The head priest at St Jacques is a queer old boy. I said Mass for the Dead today and told him it was for all those killed in the war. 'All those killed among the Allies you mean,' he said. 'Oh no, for the dead of all armies,' I told him. He made a very ugly face and said: 'I won't do that. The Bon Dieu must look after the Germans Himself, for me!'”⁵⁰ Three weeks later, on March 25, Bickerstaff-Drew had been invited to lunch with a senior French officer and the pair were sitting for lunch when they heard that about 70 or 80 German prisoners were on the way into the town. “I said: 'Now mon colonel, don't be unkind to them.' He seemed to think it very funny and got everyone round to tell them how Monsignor had forbidden him to maltreat the Boches.”⁵¹ This deviation of attitudes among the British and French Catholic clergy is particularly interesting given the influence (as will be discussed in a later chapter) that the French military chaplains may have exerted over their British counterparts when it came to work at the cutting edge of the battlefield. However, it may be worth remembering that French territory had been annexed and many churches and parishes destroyed.

While good archival evidence means comparisons between British and French clergy can be made with some confidence, there are far fewer examples of the behaviour of German chaplains, especially such a minority group as the Catholic priests. Lehmann states: “There were a few Catholic priests serving as military chaplains in the Prussian Army.... their numbers were small and always remained so. Considering the anti-Catholic tradition of the Prussians, the task of these Catholic military chaplains was particularly difficult.”⁵² A rare insight into the thoughts of a German Catholic field chaplain serving with the Central Powers in 1915 is provided by Burleigh, who reports on the unnamed chaplain as explaining to his new military flock that the war is about German patriotic idealism confronting the “barbarism of the Russians, the atheism of the French and the insatiable cupidity and mercantile spirit of the English”.⁵³ While this is very useful in terms of German Catholic motivations, it does not tell us anything about how such a chaplain would deal with allied wounded or prisoners. What we do know is that the German authorities executed a number of French clergy as spies after the priests became trapped behind the advancing enemy line and were subsequently found to be in prohibited areas or in possession of maps that could be construed as

⁴⁹ *Priests in the Firing Line*, Gaell, R., (1916), p.5

⁵⁰ *John Ayscough's Letters...*, Bickerstaffe-Drew, F., (1919), p.81

⁵¹ *Ibid*, p.96

⁵² Lehmann, H., 'In The Service of Two Kings: Protestant Prussian Military Chaplains 1713-1918', in (ed) Bergen, DL., *The Sword of the Lord: Military Chaplains from the First to the Twenty-First Century*, (University of Notre Dame Press, USA, 2004), p.125

⁵³ *Earthly Powers*, Burleigh, M., (2005), p.446

being helpful to the allies. We also know that it was a German Catholic priest who ministered to the hundreds of wounded Munster Fusiliers following the battle for Etreu in 1914, and who subsequently provided a service for the Irish battalion's 127 dead.⁵⁴ Johnstone and Hegarty claim that such incidents involving German clergy were not uncommon, though they sadly do not provide further examples.⁵⁵ In the *Catholic Soldiers* report of 1919 into the impact of the war on the religious faith of Catholic soldiers from Britain and America there are examples of German Catholic priests ministering to British prisoners. A private with the Machine Gun Corps who was a PoW in 1918 states: "During seven sad months of captivity there was only one bright day, when a German priest came and all the (Catholic) prisoners, French and English, were permitted to receive Absolution and Holy Communion." Another British PoW wrote: "On several occasions they took the Catholic fellows to a service given for German Catholic soldiers. There was a priest who heard our confessions, although he could not understand or speak a word of English. He had a specially printed book and looking at it we pointed out our sins, which were translated into German."⁵⁶

The senior British Catholic officer Rowland Fielding felt that he had made an important discovery at a German military cemetery in a town called Leuse in November 1918. "Sandwiched in between the German graves, here and there, is an English grave. The crosses over these English graves are precisely the same as those on either side of them, but there is always a distinction between a dead German and a dead Englishman. The former 'rest in God (Ruht in Gott); the latter just 'rests' (Hier ruht ein Engländer)."⁵⁷ Fielding's finding may say something about the attitude of the mainly Protestant German military machine but it does not appear representative of the attitude of German and British Catholic chaplains. In their case it would appear that concessions were made to the enemy if they proved to be fellow Catholics.

iv. Catholic infrastructure and symbolism:

One experience that the RC military chaplains from both Britain and Germany would certainly have shared is a sense of wonder at the access they had to the infrastructure of their faith and seemingly all-pervading visibility of its symbolism on the Western Front. The Methodist minister Robert Rider, who served initially as an infantryman and later as an army chaplain in France and Flanders, was to later reflect that "the Roman Church had enjoyed many advantages during the campaign". He went on to highlight a number of key points to support his claim: firstly that the general populace was Catholic; secondly that the village churches were at the service of the Catholics with their resident native priest and, in many cases, their general ecclesiastical equipment; and finally that most villages had, at both entries, the sacred Catholic figure of the Crucifix as well as a common public shrine

⁵⁴ Johnstone, T., *Orange, Green and Khaki*, (Dublin, 1992), p.33

⁵⁵ Johnston, T., and Hegarty, J., *The Cross On The Sword: Catholic Chaplains in the Forces*, (Chapman, London, 1996), p.74

⁵⁶ Plater, C., *Catholic Soldiers*, (Longmans, Green and Co, London, 1919), p.65

⁵⁷ *War Letters...*, Fielding, R., (1929), p.203

inviting men's religious courtesies.⁵⁸ The first of these points is one that has already been addressed earlier in this chapter, but the latter two are in need of further investigation.

The practicalities of organising religious ceremonies in a battle zone were to prove problematic for army chaplains of all faiths during the First World War. Some had makeshift altars that they carried around with them, while others would simply throw a sacramental cloth over an empty ammunition box or anything else that was readily to hand. Chaplains would often find such services deeply affecting; such as Father Benedict Williamson, who recalled one such gathering in a small German pill-box near Ypres at St Jean. "The building was so low we could not stand upright. By the light of a solitary candle, all crouching down, we sang 'Faith of our Fathers', 'Sweet Sacrament Divine', and 'Soul of My Saviour', and then after Benediction all the boys received Holy Communion. Shorn of every outward sign of solemnity, yet I scarcely remember a service more impressive."⁵⁹ Monsignor Bickerstaff-Drew wrote in September 1914: "Yesterday we had Mass in one of the immense Gothic barns and it was crammed. Some tell me that there were 1,000 men present. It was really impressive; the great dim barn, the crowd of soldiers crouched in the hay, the enemy guns booming three miles off."⁶⁰ Nevertheless, the gathering of large numbers of men anywhere near 'the front' was an obvious hazard due to the threat of a German plane spotting the crowd and directing fatal artillery fire down on them. Operating under such conditions was stressful, and Father Fred Gillett must sum up the feeling of many when he got back behind the lines in December 1916 at Abbeville and recorded in his diary: "Mass. What a blessing it is to get into a church again."⁶¹

Father Gillett was right to feel privileged, especially when the plight of non-Catholic chaplains is taken into consideration. When the Anglican chaplain Reverend Samuel Leighton Green found a largely undamaged chapel near Achicourt in April 1917 he immediately commandeered it, and with good reason. "This was a boon as there had been trouble in using the more prolific Roman Catholic churches found across France. Some French priests refused to allow Protestant services in them," it was noted. The Anglican chaplain Horsley Smith went even further in apportioning blame for this, claiming: "I am sorry to say that the French Church behaved very badly to us after 1915 to allow us to use even ruined churches for our services... I am afraid we had the English Roman Catholic padres to thank for the French Church's dealing so hardly with us, for it was they who stirred up the good natured French Bishops against us."⁶² This lack of facilities could place the Anglicans in awkward situations, with the Rev Leighton Green stating that he was forced to attend a Catholic church service on All Saints' Day 1918 as there was no other option available to him.⁶³

This Catholic access to an established religious infrastructure was an indisputable source of

⁵⁸ *Reflections on the Battlefield...*, Rider, R.J., (2001), p.144

⁵⁹ *Happy Days...*, Williamson, B., (1920), p.55

⁶⁰ *John Ayscough's Letters...*, Bickerstaffe-Drew, F., (1919), p.28

⁶¹ Father Fred Gillett's unpublished diary for 1916, (private collection)

⁶² Loudon, S., *Chaplains in Conflict: The Role of Army Chaplains Since 1914*, (Avon Books, London, 1996), p.40

⁶³ Leighton Green, Rev S.F., *Somewhere In Flanders: Letters of a Norfolk Padre in the Great War*, (ed) McLaren, S.J., (Larks Press, Norfolk, 2005), p.100

strength and help to British chaplains and their flock. In January 1917, just two days after arriving in France and feeling somewhat lost and alone, the young Catholic officer Edwin Campion Vaughan was able to gain much-needed support and sustenance at Etaples: “This evening I went to Benediction in the cathedral and on leaving was presented with a little medal by a nun. This I have attached to a ring on my braces.” Later, in July, he was able to visit a former Catholic convent in the town of Poperinghe that was being used as a base by a Catholic army chaplain. “In the pretty chapel, with blue walls supporting clustered angels, we moralised aloud upon our presence in war-stained khaki on the spot where gentle nuns and children had so often knelt at Benediction.”⁶⁴ The RC chaplains were often able to recharge their batteries away from the filth and horrors of the trenches by making visits to convents behind the lines where they would be assured of a good meal at worst, and in many cases a bath, clean clothes and a bed with freshly laundered sheets. A form of sustenance that was again unavailable to their counterparts from other faiths. Indeed, such preferential treatment in a Catholic country could often be used to the advantage of many in an army battalion.

The Anglican chaplain Rev Witherow recorded in March 1918 that the officers of the 2nd battalion of the Royal Irish Rifles would often send their Catholic chaplain, Father Gill, in front of them into villages as they would then all enjoy preferential treatment. “He was a great help to us on the retreat because of the respect with which the French people treated him. He could get any billet in a village because the inhabitants were only too glad to have a priest in their house,” explained Witherow.⁶⁵ Even the inevitable shell damage, or even total destruction, of Catholic churches in such villages failed to dishearten the faithful, who would often derive a sense of the miraculous from amid the desolation. In Vermelles in 1915 the senior Catholic officer Rowland Fielding came across such a scene and wrote: “We explored the battered skeleton of the old church. The roof has collapsed and now litters the floor, mixed with the loose stones from the shattered walls. Yet one thing alone remains intact, or practically so, a statue in marble of Our Lord beneath the High Altar. Though a shell has actually passed through the centre of the altar the figure remains unharmed, except for a tiny fragment chipped from the beard. Even the fingers are perfect.”⁶⁶ As Robert Rider suggests in his third point at the start of this sub-section, such a keen sense of symbolism (including crucifixes at village entrances that were often supported by public shrines) was central to Roman Catholicism and presented a dilemma to the other faiths both during and after the war.

The Western Front has been described as having been a “sacred landscape... thickly planted with roadside calvaries” whose influence on Protestant Britons, many of whom spent four years being exposed to it, should not be underestimated.⁶⁷ In fact, many non-Catholic soldiers were to become familiar enough with the imagery to develop the Catholic habit of collecting crucifixes and religious medals themselves, albeit often as much for good luck charms or souvenirs as out of a deep

⁶⁴ Campion Vaughan, E., *Some Desperate Glory*, (Warne, London, 1981), pp.3 & 184

⁶⁵ Witherow, Rev T.H., *Personal Recollections of the Great War*, (unpublished memoir, The Liddle Collection, Leeds University Library, 1920)

⁶⁶ *War Letters...*, Fielding, R., (1929), p.14

⁶⁷ *God and the British Soldier...*, Snape, M., (2005), p.42

sense of religious conviction. Just months into the war, one Catholic chaplain was writing to *The Tablet* to inform the Catholic readers about the number of Protestant soldiers asking for religious medals.⁶⁸ In Father Charles Plater's *Catholic Soldiers* report of 1919 he concluded that religious amulets had become so common among all faiths that they could no longer be seen as distinctly Catholic.⁶⁹ There were also those from non-Catholic backgrounds who were clearly moved on a spiritual level by such trinkets, with Rowland Fielding noting the reaction of one of his fellow officers at a Mass at which crucifixes blessed by the Pope were handed to the men. He said: "One of my non-catholic company commanders asked if he might take a crucifix. He told me later it was the most impressive ceremony he had ever seen."⁷⁰ In September 1914 Monsignor Bickerstaff-Drew reported a similar situation following a service, stating: "The Protestant officers were all impressed by our Mass and our people."⁷¹ The army chaplain Father William Doyle even felt able to boast in 1916: "There are few men, no matter what their belief, who do not carry a rosary or a Catholic medal round their necks. I wonder what the non-Catholic padres think of this fearful increase in Idolatry!"⁷² He was right to think that it would present a dilemma, with Wilkinson stating that the Church of England was not only acutely aware of the issue, but subsequently forced to address whether or not the crucifix could ever be thought of again as a symbol of "Popish superstition". The general consensus appears to be that it couldn't, and the matter may be seen to have reached something of a conclusion when the designs for the Commonwealth war cemeteries were decided in the 1920s: after initial controversy about the large and free-standing Cross of Sacrifice to be incorporated in each facility, the Anglican traditionalists who suggested that the symbolism was too Roman Catholic were roundly defeated.⁷³

All of this hinted at a bigger problem for the non-Catholic faiths. Father Doyle wrote in 1916: "Though the life at times is rough and hard enough there are many consolations for a priest, not the least of which is the number of converts, both officers and men coming into the Church. Many of them have never been in contact with Catholics before and above all have been immensely impressed." He was to add in 1917: "I see in the paper that 13,000 soldiers and officers have become converts since the war began, but I should say this number is much below the mark."⁷⁴ As mentioned in the introduction to the thesis, *The Tablet* was to claim that this figure was far higher, and that nearer to 40,000 men were converted on the battlefields. Conversions were news for the secular press as well as the Catholic press when they involved Anglican chaplains, especially those who had made their decision following service on the battlefields. Under the headline "More Anglican Clergy 'Go Over'" in August 1918, the *Manchester Evening Chronicle* stated that 11 Anglican chaplains had recently decided to convert to Catholicism: these included Rev Heaton

⁶⁸ *The Tablet*, 20 February 1915

⁶⁹ *Catholic Soldiers*, Plater, C., (1919), p.25

⁷⁰ *War Letters...*, Fielding, R., (1929), p.106

⁷¹ *John Ayscough's Letters...*, Bickerstaffe-Drew, F., (1919), p.28

⁷² *The Padre of Trench Street...*, O'Rahilly, A., (1920), p.95

⁷³ *The Church of England...*, Wilkinson, A., (1978), pp.261 and 303

⁷⁴ *The Padre of Trench Street...*, O'Rahilly, A., (1920), pp.95, 52 and 124

Darby, who had been acting as a military chaplain in Egypt, and Rev Nugent, a Brighton-based vicar who had gone into the army chaplaincy and worked with the British Red Cross in Arras, France.⁷⁵ It was the kind of story that could only add to impressions that Catholics soldiers and their chaplains were winning the religious war in the trenches and it is possible to see how other faiths may have felt that the all-pervading RC symbolism may have been influential in this.

vi. Conclusion:

The outbreak of war presented Roman Catholics with a unique opportunity in countries where they had long been treated with suspicion. The result was often displays of national support and, as Loudon states, any opposition to this by army chaplains would have led to a dramatic lessening in both their own and their faith's power and prestige.⁷⁶ This national allegiance did, however, cause fractures to the international structure of the Roman Church and the arrival of Catholic refugees could only have served to strengthen resolve among large swathes of the British Catholic clergy and their parishioners to take up the cause. In fact, such was the sense of national righteousness that even the Pope's proclamations were, on the whole, roundly ignored or even undermined by the Catholics of all combatant nations.

Despite this strong sense of nationhood and common distrust of the enemy, there is still good evidence of religious unity on the battlefield among Catholics, especially when it came to the administering of the Sacraments for the enemy wounded and dead. Catholic chaplains on both sides seem to have been willing to try and ensure a respectful level of treatment for fellow members of their faith among the enemy. As such, the internationalism of the church still held sway among the chaplains at what may be described as a core level.

The Catholic chaplains, and there were thousands on both sides, appear to have held an advantage when it came to undertaking large parts of their work: this as a direct result of sharing their faith with the majority of the inhabitants on the Western Front. As demonstrated, the landscape and infrastructure was far more supportive to followers of the Catholic Church. In fact, such was the strength of its influence it may have played a significant part in converting large numbers of British troops and more than a handful of Anglican chaplains.

Taking all of this into consideration, it seems fair to conclude that the international nature of the Catholic faith, despite being heavily tempered by national loyalties, was to place the British RC chaplains in a unique position that provided them with advantages over their counterparts from other faiths when it came to their work on the battlefields of the Western Front.

⁷⁵ *Manchester Evening Chronicle*, August 8, 1918

⁷⁶ *Chaplains in Conflict...*, Loudon, S., (1996), p.6

CHAPTER 2

Class, Ethnicity and the RC Chaplains

Introduction

The majority of historians who make even passing reference to the Army Chaplaincy in the Great War usually refer, often without recourse to substantiation or footnote, to the Roman Catholic clergy as having not only had more experience of working with the poorer classes but usually sharing a common working-class background with the average British soldier or 'Tommy'. Such references are usually at the expense of their Anglican counterparts, and respected academics (many of whom have been referenced in this thesis) are as likely to be culpable as popular commercial history writers. It is a mantra which has been repeated so often that it has become all but engraved in the history books:

“Roman Catholic chaplains almost wholly came from a working-class background, unlike the Anglican clergy, but like the majority of the soldiers,” states Wilkinson.¹

“... it was understandable that Catholic chaplains at the Front were more readily accepted by the Tommy than their Anglican opposite number. The working-class origins of Catholic chaplains meant that there were fewer of the barriers separating them from the average Tommy than their public school orientated Anglican counterpart,” adds Loudon.²

“Chaplains (CoE) were separated from most of the soldiers by education and class. They came out poorly from any comparison with Roman Catholic priests, who were from a similar social background as the men,” writes Burleigh.³

Schweitzer adds an ethnic dimension to the mix, by stating: “In contrast to the Oxford-educated Bere, Roman Catholic chaplains, many of whom were recruited in Ireland or were of Irish descent, were drawn almost entirely from the working classes and therefore experienced little social awkwardness.”⁴

Such claims about the social background of the RC chaplains provide an important aspect of their legacy, not least as the inference is that they enjoyed a substantial advantage over their counterparts from other denominations as a result. It is not my intention to prove or disprove claims about the Anglican chaplains and their backgrounds as there is already plenty of material on this subject,⁵ instead I intend to look at the working-class credentials of the Roman Catholic clergy and their flock, both in the run-up to the war and during the conflict. The aim will be to see if it is possible to determine the RC chaplains' class backgrounds and validate the prevailing literature. In addition, the issue of ethnicity also becomes relevant as a result of high levels of Irish migration and

¹ Wilkinson, A., *The Church of England and the First World War*, (SPCK London, 1978), p.130

² Loudon, S., *Chaplains in Conflict: The Role of Army Chaplains Since 1914*, (Avon Books, London, 1996), p.51

³ Burleigh, M., *Earthly Powers: The Conflict Between Religion and Politics from the French Revolution to the Great War*, (Harper, London, 2006), p.451

⁴ Schweitzer, R., *The Cross and the Trenches: Religious Faith and Doubt Among British and American Great War Soldiers*, (Praeger, Westport, USA, 2003), p.174

⁵ For the most recent work see Parker, L., *The Whole Armour of God: Anglican Army Chaplains in the Great War*, (Helion, Midlands, 2009)

the large number of Catholic chaplains who were of Irish stock. I will therefore attempt to discover whether ethnicity is a reliable marker for class in terms of the Catholic Irish and their chaplains and to see if a bias towards the use of Irish experiences of the war provides a truly representative picture of the wider experiences of the British Catholic chaplains.

i. Working-class assumptions:

Before looking specifically at individual priests it is important to recognise the wider social, political and religious contexts that may have resulted in the 'working-class' label being apportioned to the Catholic chaplains. Roman Catholicism was unquestionably thriving in Britain's working-class districts at the time of the Great War, with the Industrial Revolution having created new concentrations of the poorer classes who had been drawn to towns and cities by the prospect of labour in factories, mills and associated trades.⁶ Poor living conditions coupled with the temptations of urban life, including alcohol, gambling, petty theft and prostitution, resulted in the Christian faiths of all denominations becoming increasingly active in the slums of nineteenth century and early twentieth century Britain.

Catholic commitment to domestic missionary activities can be traced back as far as the seventeenth century, but certainly grew in strength in the industrial era with the establishment of such organisations as the Society of St Vincent de Paul (launched in the 1840s to help the poor in their own homes). However, it was possibly the high-profile stance of the Vatican in the latter part of the 19th Century that was to leave a more indelible mark. In particular, the 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum* from Pope Leo XIII provided acknowledgement from the highest level of the church that it could not hope to re-connect society with Christianity if it was identified too closely with established political and privileged traditions. This was a clear commitment to a new social order, and it has been argued that publicity surrounding it played a major part in cementing the image of the Catholic Church as the main friend to the poor at the turn of the 20th Century.⁷ High-profile campaigns, such as Cardinal Manning's successful mediation in the London dock strike of 1889, are also likely to have helped consolidate the public perception of the Catholic faith as a defender of working-class rights.

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to think that other denominations were inactive in the same field. Recognition of the need to make contact with the working classes was strong in many quarters of the Church of England and a younger, more politicised, Anglican clergy were keen to "adapt the church to take into account working-class reality".⁸ Furthermore, the evangelical efforts of all of the churches that came as a result of the challenges presented by the new industrial realities, particularly when it came to education and church building, were generally successful. It is worth noting that by

⁶ Cox, J., *English Churches in a Secular Society: Lambeth 1870-1930*, (Oxford University Press, 1982)

⁷ *The Church of England...*, Wilkinson, A., (1978), p.134 and Marty, M., 'Modern American Religion: Volume 1, 1893-1919', (The University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp.182-184

⁸ Gregory, A., *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War*, (Cambridge University Press, 2008), p.160

the middle of the nineteenth century one major problem that the Church of England had faced, in providing sufficient clerical cover for the urban areas, had been successfully addressed and an enormous programme of church building undertaken. In addition, by the 1840s the national religion was consecrating eight new churches per month and had added more than a million new sittings by 1851.⁹ So, while celibate Roman Catholic clergy had distinguished themselves as 'slum priests' in areas where genteel Church of England clerics and their families may not have previously wanted to be posted, it is hard not to accept Burleigh's claim that: "Nothing can be further from the truth that the Church of England somehow eschewed social responsibilities, although Nonconformists liked to depict it."¹⁰ If this is the case, it is wrong to assume that only Roman Catholic army chaplains had an understanding and empathy with 'the average Tommy'.

As mentioned in the introduction, a further cultural and ethnic element is often drawn into this debate in relation to the influence of Irish immigration on Catholicism on mainland Britain during the 19th Century. This influence, which some claim left Catholicism "buoyant to the point of triumphalism" in the run-up to the war, is well-established.¹¹ However, while the background of the majority of the migrants is generally accepted as having been religiously tied to Catholicism, assumptions about the economic make-up of this group can be dangerous. For example, in Liverpool 17 per cent of the city's population in 1841 was Irish, meaning that it already had 50,000 well-established Irish residents before the potato famine, many of whom were wealthy middle and upper-middle-class merchants.¹² Furthermore, the social mobility that resulted from the new industrial opportunities meant that the situation had become even more complex by the start of the twentieth Century. Migrant communities may have started off as working class but if the right circumstances prevailed they could rapidly start to achieve their aspirations as members of a new white-collar workforce or self-employed commercial class.

This kind of social mobility provides good grounds to argue that while a large proportion of the native-born priests came from traditional, and often Irish, working-class stock, a not insignificant amount would have come from families who were already successfully scaling the social ladder and taking large steps towards, if not already having achieved, a form of middle-class 'respectability'. So, there is an argument that while Roman Catholicism on mainland Britain had clearly been underpinned by continual and massive Irish immigration, it did not necessarily follow that all of the priests who originated from the migrant community were 'working class' by the start of the Great War in 1914.

ii. Clerical backgrounds:

In 2010 the Catholic historian John Davies attempted to carry out a study into the family

⁹ *Earthly Powers*, Burleigh, M., (2005), p.369

¹⁰ *Burleigh, M., Earthly Powers, (Harper: London, 2005), p.379*

¹¹ *The Last Great War...*, Gregory, A., (2008), pp.158-159

¹² Royden, M., 'The World In One City: Liverpool', *Who Do You Think You Are? Magazine*, (BBC Magazines Bristol, July 2011), p.18

backgrounds and social class of Roman Catholic priests who had been born in Liverpool between 1850 and 1900.¹³ The study is of particular interest to this dissertation as many of the clerics would have been the ideal age for serving as military chaplains in the Great War. Davies conceded that he found it difficult to identify and label the social backgrounds of the clerics, with their obituaries in both local and national Catholic directories and publications rarely providing a rounded picture of the individuals whose personal histories only appeared to begin after they had decided to take Holy Orders. Indeed, even a cursory review of the clergy lists at Salford Diocesan Archive (one of the largest Catholic communities in Britain at the time of the war) and the monthly Catholic newspaper serving that congregation, *The Harvest*, support this claim. The obituaries do not make any mention of parents or upbringing prior to ordination.¹⁴ It is a problem exacerbated by the common practice of boys who expressed a 'calling' often being taken away from their families at a relatively early age. While such a situation would clearly have a tendency to subjugate the influence of class background, for historians it has made it even harder to determine the actual birth-roots of individuals whose 'family' had now become 'The Church'. Such a lack of clarity does not, of course, validate the common presumption about the working-class backgrounds of priests any more than it disproves it but it does give pause for thought.

When looking at the social backgrounds of Catholic chaplains, the aforementioned factor of social mobility has to be considered, not least as it had already resulted in a number of new Catholic parishes appearing in the 1870s and 1880s in more socially affluent areas. Indeed, in the latter part of the nineteenth century there was something of a battle for the education of the children of these middle-class Catholics. St Joseph's College in Beulah Hill, London, was set up by the Brothers of the Christian Schools with the specific aim that "from the first the Brothers intended their college at Clapham for boys of middle-class parents".¹⁵ The Jesuit and Benedictine orders, who were perhaps most closely associated with the old English Catholic traditions, were particularly active in middle-class education. Indeed, the first Jesuit Day School and middle-class Catholic school in England was established at St Domingo House in Liverpool in the late nineteenth century.¹⁶ In addition, the sons of older English Catholics (usually from the commercial or middle classes) would often be educated by Benedictines or Jesuits and, if they became priests, would often become Benedictine or Jesuit priests rather than diocesan priests. Neither the Jesuits or Benedictines were known for their recruitment among the working classes:¹⁷ a factor that cannot be ignored when looking at Catholic army chaplains as such a large proportion came from either Jesuit or Benedictine backgrounds. For example, 65 Benedictine monks from abbeys of the English Benedictine Congregation and from

¹³ Davies, J., 'Catholic Families Produce Catholic Priests: Roman Catholic priests, social class and family background in the late 19th and early 20th centuries', (paper presented to a joint conference of the Preston branch of the Institute of Local and Family History and the North West Catholic History Society, Saturday, November 20, 2010, University of Central Lancashire, UK)

¹⁴ Clergy Lists Salford Diocesan Archive 1914-1919; *The Harvest* 1914-1919

¹⁵ Battersby, W., *St Joseph's College 1855 -1955*, (Burns & Oates, London, 1955), p.8

¹⁶ 'Catholic Families Produce Catholic Priests...', Davies, J., (2010)

¹⁷ Marrin, A., *The Last Crusade: The Church of England in the First World War*, (Durham, Duke University Press, 1975), p.17

English houses of Continental Congregations served as military chaplains during the war.¹⁸ In addition, as will be seen later in the chapter, many Jesuits came from privileged Irish as well as English backgrounds.

Of course, there is another side to this argument and it would be wrong to suggest that the Catholic church was solely interested in middle-class education. Diocesan schools, or those run by teaching orders with more of a history of working with the poorer classes (such as the De La Salle Brothers)¹⁹ were far from uncommon. Nevertheless, even with the aid of scholarships, higher levels of education still came with financial commitments: whether this be the need for families to pay for uniform and books or simply shoulder the loss of the extra income that a working sibling would bring into the household. The same kind of costs would also be associated with seminary training. There is as such a viable argument to suggest that children from poorer families would have faced far more of a struggle in seeing their child achieve the kind of education and training associated with becoming a member of the priesthood. More to the point in terms of this thesis, there does appear to be ample evidence to suggest that Catholicism crossed class divides and that the background of the military chaplains was therefore far from one-dimensional.

iii. Chaplains and public schools:

In a biography of the Great War military chaplain Father William Doyle, Michael Moynihan claims that with the Catholic army chaplains “there were none of the barriers that separated the average Tommy from the most well-meaning of public-school-orientated Anglicans”.²⁰ This is an unusual statement given that Father Doyle was himself a product of the fee-paying Ratcliffe College in Leicestershire. Furthermore, we will see when we look at a number of specific Catholic chaplains, that there is ample evidence of attendance at private schools and leading universities. When Henry Dundas, a junior officer and product of Eton, looked around the Mess of the Scots Guards in 1917 he was relieved to see that it was dominated by public schoolboys, including an old boy of the influential Roman Catholic facility at Belmont.²¹ Large numbers of public, fee-paying schoolboys (including both former and existing pupils, staff and chaplains) signed up from the leading Catholic colleges, with many having had experience in military leadership courtesy of the Officer Training Corps (OTC) movement that so many public schools (of all religious denominations) had embraced. For example, at Stonyhurst the whole college trained on two afternoons each week and members of the OTC regularly took part in exercises with soldiers from the professional garrison at Preston.²² The archive at Stonyhurst reveals that just two years into the war more than 700 pupils were serving

¹⁸ Hagerty, J.H., 'Benedictine Military Chaplains in the First World War', (paper presented to the English Benedictine Congregation History Commission Symposium, 1998)

¹⁹ See for good examples Battersby, W., *The De La Salle Brothers in Great Britain*, (Burns & Oates, London, 1954)

²⁰ Moynihan, M., *God On Our Side: The British Padres in World War I*, (Leo Cooper, London, 1983), p.175

²¹ From Lewis-Stempel, J., *Six Weeks: The Short and Gallant Life of the British Officer in the First World War*, (Weidenfeld & Nicholson, London, 2010), p.59

²² Snape, M., 'British Catholicism and the British Army in the First World War', *Recusant History*, Vol.26, No.2, (October 2002), p.316

with the Forces in The Great War, and a number were operating as RC Army Chaplains. The Cambridge University Catholic Chaplaincy department reported that due to war service its numbers had dropped by October 1914 to just 30. By Easter of 1915 the figure had fallen to 20 students and by autumn of the same year the numbers were down to “only two or three English or Irish added to which was a handful of Catholics, no more than six, from India and the Empire”.²³ It was a similar story at other elite Catholic establishments such as Ampleforth in Yorkshire, where 375 old boys and staff served with the military, including four monks who acted as Army chaplains,²⁴ and St Ignatius College, in Enfield, Middlesex, which had 451 old boys and staff fighting. Among the list of fatalities at St Ignatius are two former masters who were both killed while serving as Army chaplains; Father Robert Monteith and Father Cuthbert McGinty.²⁵ Most of the men who fought from these elite Catholic establishments were said to be serving as junior officers, and none would have had any problem identifying the soup spoon during silver service in the officers' mess.

When talking about the officer class, it should also be remembered that the chaplains were officers by rank in the military machine. Like any other officer they were given a number and commission and their appointment would be published in the supplement to the *London Gazette*. They were now among the higher tiers of a strictly rank-ordered society, entering a whole nine ranks above the private soldier. As Loudon states: “It is an undeniable fact and the universal experience of army chaplains that for the greater part of their ministry they will have disproportionately more contact, ecclesiastically, administratively and socially with fellow officers than they will with non-commissioned ranks.”²⁶ There is, as such, no escaping the fact that most of a chaplain's time away from his duties would be spent in the company of officers. In the early part of the war the vast majority of these officers were public-school educated and generally from the wealthier classes: indeed, it could be argued that it wasn't until the rising level of casualties forced a change of heart that grammar school boys started to be accepted into the officers' messes of many regiments.

The British Army was polarised by class at the outbreak of war; this was not an army of conscription, as in France and Germany, where the middle classes served in the rank-and-file alongside the labourer.²⁷ Even the Territorial Army tended to be run on feudal lines, with “the 'other ranks' from the terraced streets and their officers from the leafy avenues”.²⁸ Furthermore, the service or 'pals' battalions set up in 1914 by Lord Kitchener, the Secretary of State for War, were often highly selective in a bid to allow volunteers from the middle classes to step forward safe in the knowledge that they would be able to fight alongside men of equal social stature.²⁹ *The Scotsman*,

²³ Gregory-Jones, P., *A History of the Cambridge University Catholic Chaplaincy 1895-1965* (privately published, 1965), pp.64-65

²⁴ Marett-Crosby, A., *A School of the Lord's Service: A History of Ampleforth*, (Butler and Tanner Ltd, Somerset, 2002)

²⁵ Pankin, P., *St Ignatius College 1894-1994*, (St Ignatius College Press, Middlesex, 1994)

²⁶ *Chaplains in Conflict...*, Loudon, S., (1996), p.33

²⁷ Holmes, R., *Tommy: The British Soldier on the Western Front*, (Harper Collins, London, 2004), p.p.102-103

²⁸ Mitchinson, K.W., *Amateur Soldiers*, (Lancashire, Jade, 1999) p.11

²⁹ Simkins, P., *Kitchener's Army: The Raising of the New Armies 1914-1916*, (Manchester University Press, 1997) Chapter 3

for example, carried an advert in December 1914 about plans for a new battalion of “university men, public school boys and sportsmen”.³⁰ The point being that chaplains who did come from working-class backgrounds were not automatically conferred an advantage as the military expanded its outreach to different social groups. While the majority of the fighting men may have come from the poorer classes, significant and ever-increasing numbers did not, particularly among the officers: and it should be noted that it was the officers who the chaplains would spend most of their time with and need to befriend in a bid to gain approval for their own aspirations.

As a further example of the wide demographic of the flock that a Catholic chaplain may be faced with while serving on the battlefields of the Great War, at the same time that hundreds were signing up from the elite schools and colleges St Joseph's Home in Lancashire (which dealt with boys from a high-poverty area) had seen more than 200 of its former occupants enlist within the first two years of the conflict.³¹ Catholicism was, to use a modern parlance, 'a broad church' and it is possible that priests from the diocesan parishes may have held the real advantage (even over members of their own faith from more closeted religious orders and teaching positions) in that they would have dealt on a daily basis with parishioners from a wider mix of social backgrounds. This, of course, could form the basis of a study in its own right, but it is worth raising the issue as another example of how sweeping generalisations about social class, army chaplains and the war are dangerous.

iv. Some Catholic chaplains:

Putting the latter issue aside and returning to the principal focus of the debate, perhaps the most obvious way of addressing the claim that the Catholic chaplains were all 'working class' is to look at some specific individuals. In his book about First World War army chaplains Moynihan looked at just the one Catholic chaplain, Father William Doyle. The author found that the Irish-born Jesuit and son of a senior civil servant did not fit the historical stereotype, but was happy to claim that this priest was “an exception” who was clearly unlike “most” of his Catholic counterparts who did come from working-class backgrounds.³² Even a cursory look at some of the most commonly quoted of Catholic chaplains (ie, those whose names appear regularly in Great War literature by virtue of memoirs or letters published for mass consumption both during and after the conflict) does not appear to support this.

For example, another Irish Jesuit priest who was to become highly decorated by the military (winning both the Distinguished Service Order and Military Cross for bravery) and who was to achieve subsequent acclaim was Father Henry Vincent Gill. Born into a well-known and landed Dublin family who had a publishing and printing business, Gill was a professor of science who got his MA at Cambridge. According to *Irish Life* magazine he remained an academic after taking Holy

³⁰ *The Scotsman*, 19 December 1914

³¹ Diocese of Salford, Catholic Protection and Rescue Society Report 1915, p.3

³² *God On Our Side...*, Moynihan, M., (1983), p.175

Orders and gave up important research work into electricity in order to join the army chaplaincy service in the war.³³ Father Gill was to ultimately gain the equivalent rank of Major (Chaplain Third Class). Father Benedict Williamson, who penned a highly popular memoir about his war service, received a late religious calling having worked as a successful architect prior to becoming a Catholic priest.³⁴ Architects are not, of course, generally associated as being working-class artisans. Father Matthew Forster Burdess (who was killed in action) was a descendant of the wealthy Forsters of Bamburgh, Northumberland, and had an ancestor who had led the Jacobite rebellion of 1715. Father Charles Whiteford (who died of wounds) was a former pupil of the top public school at Rugby and had gone on to study at Merton College in Oxford before joining the priesthood, while Father Marshall, who was serving with the 21st Division, was an Oxford graduate who worked as the Roman Catholic Oxford University Chaplain after the war was over. The wealthy Devases family, brought up as Catholics after the head of the household (Charles Stanton Devas) converted while studying at Eton, had three sons serving as RC army chaplains.³⁵

To go into more detail, Father Henry Day, a Jesuit who had also been public-school educated, served as a chaplain with an elite cavalry regiment and its associated units and was not ashamed to reveal that he was very much at home in such refined company. Indeed, it is worth repeating some of Day's accounts of his comrades and experiences from the first of two successful memoirs that he was to have published (and reprinted due to popular demand) after the war: "With the members of the regiment I passed the remaining period in England. They were a delightful set to live with... the absence of class distinction favoured this. The HAC (Honorary Artillery Company) is a club as well as a regiment and one of the qualifications for membership is a public school education. The men I was with, like their officers, belonged for the most part to the well-to-do class." Day continued: "The social latitude allowed me, from time to time, to hold little evening parties in my room after Mess. At these familiar reunions we indulged in due moderation in smoking, wine, cakes and coffee, accompanied with social chat, songs, recitations and stories. These cheery parties are amongst my happiest recollections of five years in the Army."³⁶ In Egypt, while billeted with the Berkshire Regiment, Day wrote of the Officers' Mess: "Iced coffee, iced lemonade, to say nothing of drinks stronger than coffee or minerals – vermouths, cocktails, John Collinses, American straw drinks, British Bass, shandy-gaff and the rest – all could be had. No wonder then that whatever the bedevilmments of the day, we were all reconciled to life when we met of an evening. Fun and chaff and ragged approached the limits at times." The Catholic chaplain was even given an exploding cigarette as part of a 'jape' involving one of the junior officers.³⁷

The senior Catholic chaplain Monsignor Bickerstaff-Drew had been born the son of an Anglican priest but ended up taking up Holy Orders in the Catholic faith. His missives to his mother

³³ *Irish Life* 24th September 1915

³⁴ Williamson, B., *Happy Days in France and Flanders*, (Harding & More Ltd, London, 1920)

³⁵ Johnston, T., and Hegarty, J., *The Cross on the Sword: Catholic Chaplains in the Forces*, (Chapman, London, 1996), p. 176

³⁶ Day, HC., *A Cavalry Chaplain*, (Heath Cranton Ltd, London, 1922), pp.37-38

³⁷ *Ibid*, p.75

from the Western Front certainly suggest that he was very much at ease, if not happier, in the company of the higher classes. Bickerstaff-Drew regularly reported home about the 'types' that he was coming into contact with while serving in France and Belgium, and in March 1915 he wrote of one posting that he clearly deemed below himself. "So far as I can judge there is no French aristocracy here; you hardly ever meet anyone in the streets who looks like a real lady, and the few gentlemen are officers who don't belong to the place," he penned.³⁸ The preceding September, in a somewhat typically class-conscious exchange, he wrote: "Next we met General Forestier-Walker: I don't mean the ghost of our old friend Sir Frederick, but his cousin who was at Salisbury and whose wife was Lady Mary Liddell, daughter of the Lord Ravensworth whom Athol Liddell succeeded."³⁹

Using material from the modern Diocese of Brentwood in Essex it is possible to put together a small case study into the backgrounds of its chaplains who served in the Great War.⁴⁰ Brentwood has 11 priests in its archives who served as military chaplains and by the use of historical records, such as the census, etc, it has been possible to identify the areas where they were born, what their parents and families did for a living and where they were educated. In some cases the evidence appears far more conclusive, but where this has not proved the case I have erred on the side of caution by lowering rather than raising social status. While clearly a limited study, the findings are nevertheless interesting in that they show that while the majority of the chaplains came from upper-working-class backgrounds, nearly a quarter came from middle-class or lower-upper-class families:

Father Thomas Adkins was born in Herne Hill, south London, as the son of a newspaper canvasser. His parents originated from Birmingham and he appears to have been from the upper working classes or lower middle classes; Father John Bloomfield was born in military barracks in Ireland and was the son of a Sergeant-Major. In his teens he was listed as living at an orphanage and it seems likely that he was working class; Father Basil Booker was born in Willesden, north-west London, and his father was a stained-glass window and ecclesiastical artist. His family tree includes Catholic bookmakers and educationalists and it appears safe to assume that he was middle class or higher; Father Vincent Cameron was born at Highgate and his father was a bookbinder. He was educated at St Wilfred's (Cotton College) in Staffordshire, suggesting he was upper working class; Father Thomas Clarke was born in Colchester and his father a boot maker and his mother a domestic servant. The evidence points to a working-class upbringing; Father Bernard Clay was born in a military camp at Folkstone, Kent, and the son of a Quartermaster from an old military family. He appears to have been from the middle classes; Father Arthur Cowd's parents were working as Hall Porter and Assistant Housekeeper at the Archbishop of Westminster's house, suggesting they were upper working class; Father Michael Healy was born in London and his parents managed a hotel in Sidmouth, making it likely that they were lower middle class; Father Wilfred Thompson was born at Mortlake, Surrey, and his father gained his MA from Cambridge University before being offered a

³⁸ Bickerstaffe-Drew, F., *John Ayscough's Letters to his Mother 1914-1916*, (Chatto & Windus, London, 1919), p.88

³⁹ *Ibid*, p.31

⁴⁰ Material provided by the Brentford Diocesan Archive including private research carried out by the archivist and from the clergy lists of 1914-1923

lecturing post at the short-lived Catholic University College in Kensington. The implication is that he came from a lower upper class or higher middle class background; Father William Toft was born at Grays and his father was a boilermaker. He was working class; Father Joseph Whitfield was born in Hackney, London, and his father a salesman and his mother a box worker, suggesting they were upper working class. Clearly this small cross-section of chaplains are from a broad social spectrum that defies the traditional trend towards generalisation.

As an addendum, two men who served with distinction with the infantry in the trenches of the First World War and then went into the priesthood after the conflict had finished were Father Eustace Dudley (the son of a Church of England vicar who was married to the daughter of an Anglican clergyman) and Father Brian Reeves (the son of a Commodore with the P&O Line who, after studying at the University of London, had worked for the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank). Both of these men would be safely labelled 'gentlemen', however, Gerald Burgoyne (another 'gentleman' who was serving as the senior officer in charge of an Irish infantry battalion) noted in a veiled reference to the background of his Catholic chaplain in January 1915 that he was a "a jolly good parson, probably, but a shocking bad Bridge player".⁴¹ The junior Catholic officer Edwin Campion Vaughan wrote contemptuously of his uncouth Catholic chaplain following a drunken gathering in the Mess in March 1917 in which "...after a long singsong, a violent rag started in which the enormous and disgusting padre offered to fight six subalterns. He knocked them about for a long time before he was de-bagged and spanked."⁴²

While accepting that all of the priests mentioned above amount to little more than a mere handful taken from the hundreds who served, it is nevertheless hoped that it has been demonstrated that generalisations about the backgrounds of the Catholic chaplains are unsound.

v. An ethnic distinction:

Having looked at the validity of the traditional 'working-class' prefix given to British Catholic chaplains, it is necessary to look more closely at a specific ethnic group. The assumption is once again that the Irish chaplains were working class. However, as has already been demonstrated, there are exceptions to that, and the Irish historian Rafferty goes even further in claiming that most of the Irish-born priests who came to serve on mainland Britain in the pre-war period "came not from the working classes but from the small farmer class".⁴³ Essentially, while many of them may not have qualified as 'gentlemen' under the more strict and elitist English class system, they were certainly not 'working class' under the traditional terms of that self-same system. It is also worth noting that the Brentwood case study featured earlier in this chapter suggests that less than half of the 11 priests who served as military chaplains were part-Irish (a total of five out of the 11 had one parent or more

⁴¹ Burgoyne, G., *The Burgoyne Diaries*, (Harmsworth Publishing, Bath, 1985), p.82

⁴² Campion Vaughan, E., *Some Desperate Glory*, (Warne, London, 1981), p.108

⁴³ Rafferty, O., 'Catholic Chaplains to the British Forces in the First World War', *Religion, State & Society*, Vol.39, No.1, (Routledge, March 2011), p.42

from Ireland). Of the Brentwood chaplains who did have a first-generation link to Ireland, two appear to have been working class, one upper-working class, one lower-middle class and the other upper-middle class. While, as previously stated, this is a very limited study, it nevertheless supports the argument against the 'one-size-fits-all' approach to the class backgrounds of the RC chaplains and suggests that it may be as contentious in the case of the Irish chaplains as it is with the other British nationals. Still, regardless of this it remains necessary to stay with the ethnic theme because of a number of other key factors relevant to the wider experiences of Catholic chaplains in the war.

Despite a strong history of Catholicism in communities of different classes across the British Isles, there is often a considerable bias of primary material relating to the Irish experience in studies of Catholics and the British Army during the war. This bias is understandable in that many Catholic soldiers were serving in Irish infantry battalions that held strong sectarian histories and therefore provide good case studies. Furthermore, the British Army actively sought to find senior officers who were Catholic themselves to lead these units. In December 1915 Lord Kitchener decided to replace the officer in command of the 16th Irish division (a force of more than 12,000 men) with a Roman Catholic.⁴⁴ For similar reasons Rowland Fielding, whom a junior officer described as “a member of one of the oldest English Roman Catholic families”,⁴⁵ was put in charge of a battalion of the traditionally Irish Catholic regiment of the Connaught Rangers. This wasn't a situation exclusive to senior officers, as would-be Catholic soldiers in England and Scotland were not only allowed but often encouraged to enlist in Irish regiments at the start of the war. As the war progressed and events such as the Easter Rising of 1916 threatened to hit enlistment, the Army Council made sure its small reserve of Irish Catholic recruits were held back to fill holes in the ranks of the southern Irish regiments.⁴⁶ By as late in the war as January 1918, it is estimated that 92 per cent of the recruits in the Connaught Rangers were Catholic, with similar percentages applied to such fellow Irish regiments as the Leinsters and Munsters.⁴⁷

However, while the Catholic battalions of Ireland unquestionably provide fertile material for historians, to focus exclusively on them denies the experiences and contribution of thousands of non-Irish Catholic soldiers and their chaplains. More worryingly, it underplays an extremely important part of the day-to-day role of the Catholic chaplains that may have had a major part to play in their legacy: the task of hunting out Catholic soldiers often found in small numbers within non-sectarian battalions. In order to investigate this further it will be necessary to look at some specific examples of the military service of non-Irish Catholics.

In 2009 a local historian called Michael Conroy decided to study the backgrounds and war records of all of the men whose names were on the First World War roll of honour at his local

⁴⁴ Snape, M., *God and the British Soldier: Religion and the British Army in the First and Second World Wars*, (Routledge London, 2005), p.72

⁴⁵ Brett, C., *An Irish Soldier*, (The Somme Association, Dublin, 2007), p.55

⁴⁶ *God and the British Soldier...*, Snape, M., (2005), p.158

⁴⁷ Callan, P., 'Recruiting for the British Army in Ireland during the First World War', *The Irish Sword*, Vol.XVII, No.66, (1987)

Catholic church of St Joseph's in Ramsbottom, Lancashire.⁴⁸ There were 24 men killed from the parish and a review of the information he collected shows that only one was serving with an Irish regiment (the Munsters) that might be said to have held a Catholic bias. The majority of the men were serving with local Lancashire battalions with no sectarian bias. This does not appear to have been an uncommon situation: for example, there are 17 names on the memorial tablet of Holy Cross Roman Catholic Church in Lewisham, London,⁴⁹ and a cursory check of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission database provides likely identification for 10 of them. Of these, none were serving with battalions or regiments that might have been expected to hold strong religious affiliations; likewise, a study by John Garlington of the First World War deaths of pupils, former pupils and masters at the Preston Catholic College⁵⁰ shows that 55 made the ultimate sacrifice, of whom only four were linked to 'Catholic' regiments (two had been serving with the 1/8th 'Irish' King's Liverpool battalion, one with the Royal Dublin Fusiliers and one with the Connaught Rangers). When Father Henry Gill joined a new army Division in January 1914, he found that aside from the Royal Irish Rifles "...the only other unit of the Brigade to have a large amount of RCs was the 2nd South Lancs".⁵¹ The Army's own statistics in the run-up to the war (those for 1913) suggest that "Catholic soldiers born outside Ireland were almost as numerous as Catholic soldiers who were Irish-born".⁵² The point being made is that Catholic soldiers were clearly spread liberally around different regiments of the British Army, which meant that Catholic chaplains often had to spread themselves just as liberally in a bid to try and provide succour to all of their military parishioners. There is ample evidence to support this.

Father Fred Gillett, an RC chaplain serving in France, wrote in his war diary on October 7, 1916: "Got mounted and rounded the area to arrange for Sunday services. Beaumetz, Prouville, Bernaville, Domestmonde, Vaquerie, Lauches and Barlette, all in a day's work." On October 12 he added: "Rode to Bernevil, Gorges, Vaquerie, Domesmont and then back home. Troops of the Brigade were billeted in all these villages and one had to nose around amongst them."⁵³ [This appears to have been standard practice for many Catholic chaplains. Father Henry Day, another Jesuit, opted to stay with the Royal Artillery at his divisional army camp, as they were billeted in a central area which made administering to a dispersed flock more viable. "...it was a large field to cover. Consequently, only occasional visits could be made to individual units. The plan I adopted was to select a special district at the beginning of each week, beat it up during the week, and say an early Mass at a convenient centre on Sunday. The beating up consisted of visits, and instructions and confessions which were often in billets, barns, stables, on the roadside, sometimes even on horseback. These were rough and ready methods but they proved eminently successful." When based at Alexandria, Egypt, his Division was dispersed over 130 miles and Day had to use the train to try

⁴⁸ Conroy, M., *Lost Lads of St Joseph's*, (Private, 2009)

⁴⁹ <http://lewishamwarmemorials.wikidot.com/memorial:catford-holy-cross-catholic-church-ww1-war-memorial>

⁵⁰ http://www.ww1cemeteries.com/british_cemeteries_memorials/preston_catholic_college.htm

⁵¹ Taylor, JW., *The 2nd Royal Irish Rifles in the Great War*, (Four Courts Press, Dublin, 2005), p.59

⁵² 'British Catholicism and the British Army...', Snape, M., (2002), p.315

⁵³ Father Fred Gillett's unpublished diary for 1916, (private collection)

and get around them all.⁵⁴

Senior Catholic Military Chaplain Monsignor Bickerstaff-Drew wrote on a similar theme in February 1915, while working behind the lines at Dieppe: "I drove far out into the country and saw six different lots of troops... yesterday morning I said Mass at St Remy; at six in the evening I motored to St Aubyn and held a little service for the Catholics there... last night I motored out to St Aubyn to give a very unconventional service to some stray sheep there. Now I'm going to look up some other stray sheep." He also wrote of his time later in the year in a military hospital at Versailles: "...a convoy of wounded arrived. It is not a very big batch, but over 300 from that eternal Ypres: as a matter of fact very few Catholics among them, but still in order to find out whether they are Catholics or not one has to see them all."⁵⁵

"I used to run from lorry to lorry by the roadside, or go up to any cluster of men I could come across, or again in the wards or tents of the hospital and ask, 'any RCs here?'" wrote one chaplain in the *Catholic Soldiers* report of 1919 into the lessons the church could learn from the conflict.⁵⁶

It is not difficult to imagine the impression this high-visibility approach must have had on the average soldier who had previously had little exposure to the Catholic faith. As discussed in the previous chapter, not only were the majority of the troops inhabiting a landscape (the Western Front) where Catholic imagery was ever-present, but British Catholic chaplains were seemingly so committed to soul-saving that they were popping up everywhere in active search of their flock. In fact, the Catholic chaplains were often so keen that the situation, as Father Benedict Williamson recounted, could verge on the farcical: "In my wanderings I called on a labour battalion whose C.O was no lover of padres. Without being the least aware of it, I found I was the third Catholic chaplain to call that day. 'What!' said the testy old gentleman, 'another of them?'"⁵⁷

It is as such important to recognise that the chaplains and men who were not linked to military formations with an obvious religious bias may have played a large part in the positive legacy of the Catholic chaplains. There is also another theme that arises (which will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter): this being that it was a commitment to delivering the Sacraments to an often dispersed flock that was to prove far more of a motivational factor to the chaplains than their social or ethnic upbringing or any other form of class consideration.

vi. Conclusion:

While there is strong evidence to show that the Catholic church had a long history of working with the poor and that this was a commitment that had only grown as a result of the Industrial Revolution, it is wrong to believe that Catholics were acting exclusively. In addition, the situation with regard to the social make-up of Catholics in the British Isles was far from clear cut: while Irish migration,

⁵⁴ *A Cavalry Chaplain*, Day, H.C., (1922), p.33, 69

⁵⁵ *John Ayscough's Letters...*, Bickerstaffe-Drew, F., (1919), pp.69, 101, 151

⁵⁶ Plater, C., *Catholic Soldiers*, (Longmans, Green and Co, London, 1919), p.137

⁵⁷ *Happy Days...*, Williamson, B., (1920), pp.18-19

often as a result of the potato famine, resulted in a massive increase in the working-class quota of Catholics on the mainland, it is also true that Catholicism had a strong and existing tradition among the middle and upper classes in both Ireland and Britain as whole. In addition, upward mobility in urban centres only served to confuse the social stereotype.

In the case of the military chaplains featured, many have been shown to come from the middle classes or families of 'means', to have studied at public schools and to have been quite at home when mixing with the elite. Although this is a limited case study, there would nevertheless seem to be enough exceptions to challenge the 'working-class' assumptions so commonly repeated by large numbers of writers and academics. Furthermore, it is quite possible that being 'working class' may not have always proved advantageous in a military establishment that was (particularly in the earlier stages of the war) polarised by class.

Finally, discussions about Roman Catholics and the Army during the First World War that focus on Irish battalions at the expense of the large numbers of British Catholics serving in non-Irish battalions would appear to neglect a large aspect of the day-to-day experience of RC army chaplains who were not embedded in sectarian battalions and had to actively seek out their flock. Sectarian and ethnic approaches to Catholicism need to be clearly labelled as such, or they are in danger of denying hundreds of thousands of Catholic soldiers from mainland Britain, and their chaplains, a voice.

CHAPTER 3

Front-line Motivations and Martyrdom

Introduction:

Perhaps the most controversial area when it comes to discussions about the actions of RC chaplains in The Great War involves comparisons about the work they undertook overseas in areas of active combat. Traditionally, the Catholic chaplains have been praised for being prepared to go into the most dangerous of situations in order to share in the hardships and horrors of the men and to ultimately provide Sacramental and spiritual support. Often this acclaim has been made at the expense of their counterparts,¹ and it was to prove particularly frustrating for Anglican chaplains who had adhered to the official ruling established at the outset that they were not to go into advanced positions. The Catholic chaplains were also subject to this ruling, but they appear to have simply ignored it or received exemption on the grounds of their Sacramental commitments. It wasn't until 1916, following a general outcry among the C of E chaplains, that the bar on their front-line participation was relaxed, by which time it could be argued that, in the eyes of the troops at least, the damage to their credibility had already been done. This despite the fact that, like their Catholic counterparts, many had ignored the ruling anyway and already been highly active in forward areas.

The often derogatory statements made about Anglican chaplains are particularly harsh when we consider the official figures, which show that 166 army chaplains died as a result of the war of whom 98 were Anglicans, 34 Roman Catholics, 12 United Board, 11 Presbyterians, 10 Wesleyans, and one Salvation Army chaplain. As Loudén states in defence of the chaplains of all denominations: "The numbers of chaplains killed or wounded is sufficient evidence of their closeness to the front and to the areas of danger." However, he then continues: "Precisely what they were doing there is often less clear."² This is a moot point as there were sound arguments for keeping chaplains out of harm's way. At the outset of the war the military felt that the chaplains could offer little in practical terms in the heat of the battle and, worse still, their wounding or death may hit morale and result in soldiers faltering. As such, it was felt that the chaplains were best-placed at a medical post where they could care for the wounded. As we will see, there are complexities to these arguments and the Catholic chaplains, who clearly did not have their hands tied in the same way as the Anglicans, were often playing to a different set of rules.

What this chapter aims to look at is the outside influences that may have motivated large numbers of Catholic chaplains to place themselves in the most dangerous places on the battlefield. More importantly, it hopes to investigate whether or not this was the best place for them to be?

¹ See, for example, Sassoon, S., *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, (Faber & Faber, London, 1930); Graves, R., *Goodbye To All That*, (Penguin, London, 1929), Blunden, E., *Undertones of War*, (Penguin, London, 1928); and Chapman, G., *A Passionate Prodigality*, (Nicholson and Watson, London, 1933)

² Loudén, S., *Chaplains in Conflict: The Role of Army Chaplains Since 1914*, (Avon Books, London, 1996), p.51

Central to this is whether their actions were religiously motivated or whether other factors, such as military empathy and personal glorification, came to play a dominant role.

i. Peer pressure:

In the opening chapter of this thesis the international nature of the Roman Catholic church and the implications this had for the RC Army Chaplains was discussed. One area of the international nature of Catholicism which has escaped debate is the potential impact and influence of the native clergy on their counterparts from across the channel. While British and German clergy were excluded from combat, this was not the case with priests from France and Belgium (nor Italy, where the British Army also saw action) who were conscripted. In anticipation of difficulties with the often anti-clerical laws of the Republican French government and its uncompromising stance towards a more active role for clergy on the battlefield, the Pope suspended the Vatican's Canon Law forbidding priests from taking part in combat units.³ However, it should be noted that the term 'combat' may be misleading: while there are examples of priests taking part in the fighting, most 'soldier priests' served alongside the infantry troops as stretcher bearers or as support to medical teams

It is estimated that 32,699 French clerics served in the armed forces during the war of whom 23,418 were secular (priests whose ministry was domestic at the outbreak of the war) and 9,281 regulars (clergy already linked to the military, usually as a fulfilment of their national service). A further 12,554 priests (usually those who were older) were based in military hospitals. Of the French clergy who served, an estimated 4,618 died in battle, with more than 13,000 winning military medals and citations for bravery. As Bergen states: "Arguably, the participation of lay and ordained Catholics in the French Army between 1914 and 1918 contributed in substantial ways to the improved stature of Catholicism in France between the two World Wars."⁴ If the role of the Catholic clergy was to have such a major impact on the citizens and politics of France, it is reasonable to assume that it would have had an influence on British Catholics and the British RC army chaplains. In fact the Catholic press in Britain was filled with the exploits of the French and Belgian priests on the battlefields, with the *The Harvest* (the monthly newspaper of Salford Diocese) producing a full-page article on the Christian Brothers of Belgium in which it stated that Belgian Military Law had seen priests and members of religious communities called-up to help the wounded on the battlefield. "They are frequently employed in the most exacting and dangerous service... several Brothers have been seriously wounded and a few have been killed. Among the latter is Brother Raymond Joseph. He met his death while helping a soldier from the firing line. Several wounded soldiers who took part in the fighting on the banks of the Yser speak of the great devotion and courage of the Belgian Brothers who, they said, during the action, kept well within the firing line, ignoring shrapnel and

³ Burleigh, M., *Earthly Powers*, (Harper: London, 2005), pp.453

⁴ Bergen, D.L., *The Sword of the Lord: Military Chaplains from the 1st to the 21st Century*, (University of Notre Dame, Indiana, USA, 2004), p.9 introduction

bullet, rendering equal service to the fallen, whether friend or foe.”⁵ If the message wasn't getting through, the same publication reported two months later that the Benedictines at Buckfast Abbey had learnt that five French monks from their province (who had been called up at the outbreak of war) had now fallen in battle.⁶ The *Sunday Chronicle* suggested, somewhat questionably, that most priests were going beyond the provision of medical support: “There are over 20,000 (French) priests serving in the Army, sharing the work of the trenches, shooting and bayoneting Germans like the best, and a remarkable proportion have been decorated for conspicuous valour.”⁷ It would appear safe to assume that British Catholics and chaplains were digesting large amounts of this material given its prevalence in such well-read Catholic publications.

It is also worth noting that one of the first memoirs to be printed by a Catholic Army chaplain who was serving in the war was that of the French priest Rene Gaell.⁸ An older man, he was sent to work at a base hospital (away from the reach of the enemy's guns) helping the wounded, but Gaell regularly corresponded with a younger Jesuit called Duroy who had been sent to serve as a soldier priest in the forward areas. Written in 1915, this is an important book as it was translated into English in early 1916, widely reviewed in Catholic publications and undoubtedly held great propaganda value in both Britain and France. The family publication *The Catholic Fireside* (which billed itself as “A weekly magazine of instruction and amusement”) reviewed Gaell's book amidst articles on saints, children's literature and dressmaking. This title regularly went to press during the war years with a front-cover illustration highlighting the destruction of French churches or such fighting Catholics as Joan of Arc.⁹ The latter is an interesting theme in that it appears to have been embraced by British Catholics at the behest of their foreign counterparts. Gaell in particular strives to remind Catholics of the noble traditions and spirit of martyrdom among their fighting forebears: “Charlemagne, Saint Louis, Joan of Arc must be holding out their arms to [the war] and thrilling with joy...”¹⁰ Gaell goes on to construct a highly uncompromising template which must have made an impression on those of his British counterparts who read his words.

On the issue of work in hospitals away from the front-line, he writes: “To be left behind was a kind of disgrace.” Adding: “There was with us priests of (age) 40 and over, kept in hospitals a long way from the front, a painful feeling... almost humiliation. To remain far from the fighting line seemed a loss of one's manhood.” There are no grey areas in Gaell's account when it comes to the real place for the clergy to serve, and he uses the younger priest Duroy as the foil to get his message across. Priests who are stretcher bearers are never more than 100 yards behind the leading waves in an attack says Duroy. This priest adds that one infantry major stated: “Heavens, I only see priests to the fore!” Duroy then continues: “Priests to the fore! That is indeed our motto.” The Jesuit later

⁵ *The Harvest*, No. 331, April 1915, (Salford Catholic Protection and Rescue Society)

⁶ *The Harvest*, No. 335, August 1915

⁷ *Sunday Chronicle*, August 8, 1915

⁸ Gaell, R., translated by Gibbs, H. and Berton, M., *Priests in the Firing Line*, (Longmans, Green and Co, London, 1916)

⁹ See for example the cover of *The Catholic Fireside*, No 1368, February 5, 1916

¹⁰ *Ibid*, pp.69-70

pens: "Priests should be right in front and among the first to face death."¹¹

According to the senior British RC chaplain Monsignor Bickerstaff-Drew, Gaell was not the only French cleric with literary pretensions and a bloodthirsty style. He wrote to his mother in May 1915: "I suffer rather from French priests who write books and want me to read them... 'Bombs and the Catholic Church', 'Asphyxiating Gases and the Revival of Religion in France'. 'God forbid!' I say inwardly."¹² Still, he could not avoid the reality of the French priests' situation. "I went and said my prayers in the village church: the priest here - as is the case in 90 out of a 100 - has gone off to fight for his country," he wrote in September 1915. The following month he added: "I heard another priest's mass this morning before my own; and when he took off his vestments in the sacristy he was a French soldier in red pantaloons, huge knee-boots, etc! You understand he is not a chaplain, just a private soldier."¹³ Father Henry Day was equally impressed while serving in Egypt in 1915, reporting on a visit to the French-run Jesuit Church and college of St Francis Xavier in Alexandria: "The pre-war staff numbered 60 Jesuits, most comparatively young. All the younger members had gone to the war; many in the ranks and some as officers, serving as combatants while others were doing ambulance duty or acting as chaplains."¹⁴

While the French priests often had a different remit to that of the British, their role in the combat zone was still generally that of stretcher bearer and life-saver rather than life-taker. However, Gaell and his friend Duroy had clear opinions on this issue. Duroy tells of a priest who, as a strong swimmer, volunteered to traverse a watercourse and review the German positions on the other side. Having completed his task his escape was barred by a sentry whom he bayoneted and killed in order to get his message back. The priest says he felt no guilt, but later had a service said for his victim.¹⁵

Faced with this kind of example it is perhaps unsurprising to read in the later diaries and memoirs of British RC chaplains that they were usually far from happy to remain behind the firing line. Father Benedict Williamson wrote that when he arrived for his military posting one of the older members of his group of Catholic clergy came out "very distressed" because he had been appointed to a 'cushy posting' at a base hospital instead of with the infantry.¹⁶ The Jesuit priest Father Henry Gill was also sent to a base hospital and wrote: "It is certainly not the kind of life to select as an amusement, I hope however that I may one day go nearer the fighting line." He later had an interview with his senior chaplain and got a posting to serve with an infantry battalion (the 2nd Royal Irish Rifles) at the front.¹⁷ Father Fred Gillet could not contain himself when he got the call on September 5, 1916, to leave his position at a base hospital and join an infantry brigade, writing: "I receive orders to go up the line – hurroo!" Showing how strongly some priests felt on the matter, he also noted in his diary on October 23 of the same year: "Went to hospitals, ie dressing stations in

¹¹ Ibid, pp. 6, 30, 75, 20 & 100

¹² Bickerstaffe-Drew, F., *John Ayscough's Letters to his Mother 1914-1916*, (Chatto & Windus, London, 1919), p.152

¹³ Ibid, pp.30 & 45

¹⁴ Day, H., SJ, MC., *A Cavalry Chaplain*, (Heath Cranton Ltd, London, 1922), p.63

¹⁵ *Priests in the Firing Line*, Gaell, R., (1916), pp.26 & 218-224

¹⁶ Williamson, B., *Happy Days in France and Flanders*, (Harding & More Ltd, London, 1920), pp.2-3

¹⁷ Taylor, JW., *The 2nd Royal Irish Rifles in the Great War*, (Four Courts Press, Dublin, 2005), p.240

Albert (France), at which the chaplains were in constant attention. Fr Kilduff and myself worked our turns, Fr Toubet would have none of the hospital work.”¹⁸ If Father Toubet had not read Rene Gaell's memoir, he would clearly have agreed with its sentiments.

ii. Military empathy and enthusiasm:

One of the most acclaimed Catholic priests to serve in the Great War was Father William Doyle, with many of his battlefield acquaintances expressing a grievance that he was not awarded the Victoria Cross. His biographer suggested that “the triple disqualification” of being an Irishman, a Catholic and a Jesuit had proved “insuperable” to the authorities.¹⁹ However, as we have already seen in the introduction to this thesis, the Catholics were far from discriminated against by the military authorities and there were more than enough bravery medals handed out to Irish-Catholic soldiers and Jesuit chaplains to make the allegations of Doyle's biographer disingenuous. It should also be noted that Father Doyle was not the type to be impressed by military baubles, writing to his father in January 1917 to effectively dismiss the value of a Military Cross he had received for bravery on the Somme in 1916: “I am sorry these awards are given to chaplains for surely he would be a poor specimen of the Lord's Anointed who would do his work for such a thing.”²⁰ Still, not all shared his attitude.

Catholic publications regularly trumpeted the successes of serving Catholics and welcomed the reflected glory and recognition of sacrifice it brought on their faith; arguably putting more pressure on adherents to earn more. When the Catholic soldier Edward Dwyer became the youngest recipient of the VC for his actions in April 1915, *The Tablet* provided Dwyer's verbatim account of his meeting with the King at which he received the honour as well as numerous column inches on his subsequent reception at Westminster Cathedral with Cardinal Bourne.²¹ Furthermore, many of the Catholic chaplains were clearly pleased to be honoured: in September 1914 Monsignor Bickerstaff-Drew wrote: “The commandant told me that my name had been recommended to be 'mentioned in despatches'. If I am mentioned in despatches it will be ripping.” He was actually to be 'mentioned' twice within short succession, and wrote to his mother in February 1915: “It is something to get one mention, but to be mentioned in both [Field Commander Sir John French] despatches is tremendous luck.”²²

Wilkinson claims that Catholic chaplains were particularly susceptible to military influence and enticements as they were more at home with the regimented and mainly celibate life of the Armed Forces, adding that this was a fact often recognised by their fellow officers. “The type of soldier who felt that being married would be a distraction from wholehearted devotion to the

¹⁸ Father Fred Gillett's unpublished diary for 1916, (private collection)

¹⁹ O'Rahilly, A., *The Padre of Trench Street: Father William Doyle*, (Longmans, Green and Company, London, 1920), p.149

²⁰ Ibid, p.67

²¹ *The Tablet*, edition of July 3, 1915

²² *John Ayscough's Letters...*, Bickerstaffe-Drew, F., (1919), pp.31, 73

Regiment had a natural sympathy with the celibacy of the Roman Catholic clergymen,” he states.²³ Johnstone and Hegarty support this, adding: “The cloistered male world of the battalion had many similarities with seminary or monastery, Priest and officer were motivated by a dedication of service.”²⁴ It is a theory that is hard to prove with any level of definitiveness, but there is strong evidence of Catholic chaplains embracing the military experience enthusiastically.

In the case of Father Fox of the Irish Guards, his enthusiasm was to prove costly: the priest lost an eye and his right hand, killed another officer and wounded two more men when he accepted the offer of 'having a go' during a bombing practice and the grenade exploded in his grasp.²⁵ Father Stephen Rawlinson, who was to become the most senior Catholic chaplain operating on the Western Front, was so enthusiastic about his khaki uniform he rarely wore his clerical collar while on military service, preferring to be indistinguishable from his fellow officers.²⁶ Such an attachment to a uniform may have been rare, but not an attachment to the broader military life and the men in the chaplains' care. In October 1914 Monsignor Bickerstaff-Drew wrote: “I suppose I shall always look back on this as the most interesting time of my life.” A month later he added: “To live together for over three months in the field of war is like nothing else, and one can never forget it.”²⁷ In a letter to the Father Provincial in January 1918, Father Gill wrote: “I have not so many Catholics in the Battalion but they are even better than family.”²⁸ It was a sentiment shared by Father Day, who, on recovering from illness at Gallipoli in 1915, was horrified at the prospect of having lost his position among his original unit and being posted elsewhere. “Dreading these contingencies” he visited his General and argued successfully for a return to his previous posting.²⁹ Such bonds could result in a further blurring of the line between the chaplain as clergyman and army officer.

Father Day wrote from the safe billets of his Division in Egypt in early 1915: “There was only one subject of conversation, one object of anxiety – the fear we might not reach Constantinople before the war ended.” He was to add: “We never lost hope of fighting the Turks in Gallipoli.” When on the Gallipoli peninsula, and harassed by a Turkish sniper, he wrote that “we all vowed vengeance and death”.³⁰ Again, in the interests of balance, the Anglican chaplain Father John Groser initially refused an order to take command of a party of men when they were left without an officer to lead them, but his Colonel later said: “I reminded him of the scores of men he knew who had fallen that day after doing their utmost... I was conveying to him my despair of a religion that could teach that such a patronising, stand-offish attitude was the right one, when my words were drowned by a terrific burst of fire from our guns who had spotted a counter-attack forming. After the shelling died

²³ Wilkinson, A., *The Church of England and the First World War*, (SPCK London, 1978), p.118

²⁴ Johnstone, T., and Hagerty, J., *The Cross on the Sword: Catholic Chaplains in the Forces*, (Chapman, London, 1996), p.103

²⁵ *Ibid*, p.129

²⁶ Rafferty, O., 'Catholic Chaplains to the British Forces in the First World War', *Religion, State & Society*, Vol.39, No.1, (Routledge, March 2011), p.53

²⁷ *John Ayscough's Letters...*, Bickerstaffe-Drew, F., (1919), pp.49 & 65

²⁸ *The 2nd Royal Irish Rifles...*, Taylor, JW., (2005), p.111

²⁹ *A Cavalry Chaplain*, Day, HC., (1922), p.182

³⁰ *Ibid*, pp.41, 52 & 170

down, Groser told me that he would do what I wanted provided he didn't carry arms.”³¹ Groser was subsequently awarded the Military Cross for fulfilling his military duty.

iii. The Sacraments and martyrdom:

It has long been argued by popular war diarists and memoir writers, academics and contemporary historians that the Sacramental nature of the Roman Catholic church (particularly concerning the absolution of sin and entry into heaven) was the most significant influence on the behaviour and legacy of its chaplains in the Great War. As already mentioned, it appears to have been the reason why they were given greater leeway from the outset of the war in how close they got to the front-lines. In 1978 Wilkinson said that the Catholic Sacramental system had a professionalism “far more adapted for pastoral work in crisis”. The Anglicans could only offer improvised prayer and counsel in times of emergency, while “Roman Catholic priests had the tangible ministry of the Viaticum and Unction to offer” the dying and seriously wounded. This, argued Wilkinson, meant that the Catholic chaplains could rely on their role as priest in a way that was not available to other faiths. While Anglicans, in particular, got sidelined with the 'Holy grocery' of looking after the secular comforts and needs of the men (such as the provision of cigarettes, magazines, and leisure-time amusements), the Catholics remained principally focussed on the religious.³² The war veteran Guy Chapman famously wrote in his influential memoir: “These Catholic priests impressed one. The Church of Rome sent a man into action mentally and spiritually cleaned. The Church of England could only offer you a cigarette.”³³ The Catholic priest Father G.L Smith concurred: “A good chaplain will, of course, work for the welfare of his men in all ways and will interest himself in their recreations... but this is not his principal duty... he must first attend to the spiritual.”³⁴ In a further coup for the Catholics, Robert Graves wrote: “...the Roman Catholic chaplains were not only permitted to visit posts of danger but definitely enjoyed to be where the fighting was, so that they could give Extreme Unction to the dying.”³⁵

The reason for this Catholic focus was the fact that the Sacraments were seen at that time as the only sure means by which to gain eternal salvation. Rafferty argues that this gave the Catholic chaplains little choice but to follow their soldiers into the most dangerous parts of the line, and that it was, as such, the expectations of their flock that was to provide the greatest influence upon their actions.³⁶ This is somewhat semantic: what ultimately drove both the actions and expectations of both the chaplains and the men was a shared belief in the importance of the same doctrines and rituals. As a result, the Catholic clergy (despite the examples of military empathy seen above)

³¹ *The Church of England...*, Wilkinson, A., (1978), p.140

³² *The Church of England...*, Wilkinson, A., (1978), pp.132-133

³³ Chapman, G., *A Passionate Prodigality*, (Nicholson and Watson, London, 1933), p.117

³⁴ Smith, G.L., 'Difficulties of Chaplains on Active Service', (Imperial War Museum, London, Accession number 5197) in Schweitzer, R., *The Cross and the Trenches: Religious Faith and Doubt Among British and American Great War Soldiers*, (Praeger, Westport, USA, 2003), p.72

³⁵ Graves, R., *Goodbye To All That*, (Penguin, London, 1929), p.158

³⁶ 'Catholic Chaplains to the British Forces...', Rafferty, O., (2011), p.35

generally remained focussed on the fact that their primary role was a religious one and that saving souls was what provided them with 'job fulfilment'. Father Benedict Williamson sums this up when he describes "the spiritual joy and consolation of the priest in those long tramps across the open and through the trenches, bearing our Blessed Lord to His children; their responsiveness and joy at His coming".³⁷ In fact the majority of the Catholic chaplains memoirs and diaries are filled with daily rounds of confession, mass, communion and the like.

Nevertheless, when discussing the Sacraments, it is also important to look at some of the complexities that arose from their application. It is an issue graphically illustrated by the famous war painting by Matania entitled *The Last Absolution of the Munsters*, in which the Catholic chaplain Father Francis Gleeson is shown as giving absolution to the 2nd Royal Munster Fusiliers at a wayside shrine as the battalion moved up to attack at Aubers Ridge in May 1915. Nearly 400 of the Munsters were to be subsequently killed in the action, but presumably assured of their place in heaven courtesy of their Absolution. Essentially, Catholic soldiers were protected from damnation as either the killer or the killed, as long as they had the Sacramental blessing to do so. The impending threat of death was unquestionably a major religious motivator, and one that chaplains of all faiths, but particularly Catholics with their Sacramental promises, were well-placed to exploit. As Father Doyle wrote in a letter from the front: "A couple of well-directed shells help my work immensely by putting the fear of God into the hearts of a few careless boys who might not have troubled about coming near me otherwise."³⁸ With both the chaplains and the military acutely aware of the power of religious influence, it is hardly surprising that some senior British officers took advantage. Major General Sir William Thwaites would gather together his chaplains (of all denominations) before an engagement to tell them "I wanted a bloodthirsty sermon and would not have any texts from the New Testament".³⁹ More often than not the priests would not be found wanting; and in some cases the message was one of Crusade and martyrdom.

In November 1914 Father Doyle wrote to a friend: "I have volunteered for the front as military chaplain. Naturally I have little attraction for the hardship and suffering... however, what decided me in the end was the thought that if I get killed I shall die a martyr and the longing of my heart will be gratified." In May 1916, after weeks of misery in the trenches near Loos, he added: "I hunger and thirst for holiness, and for humiliations and sufferings, which are the short-cuts to holiness."⁴⁰ Although this is an extreme example, the theme of martyrdom and self-sacrifice is not only common in much Catholic correspondence and literature from the war, but one that chaplains regularly appear to have passed on to their parishioners. The French priest Duroy wrote: "To fall for one's country is not to die: it is to take eternal life by assault." Later, in a sermon to troops facing imminent combat, he added: "I believe in the resurrection of the body, I believe in the life everlasting, to which bursting shells, bullets and bayonets open the splendid portals and reveal the

³⁷ *Happy Days...*, Williamson, B., (1920), p.189

³⁸ *The Padre of Trench Street...*, O'Rahilly, A., (1920), p.96

³⁹ *Earthly Powers*, Burleigh, M., (2005), p.451-452

⁴⁰ *The Padre of Trench Street...*, O'Rahilly, A., (1920), pp.9-10 & 40

beauty that endures.” The result of his words? “Never did troopers set out so calmly to meet death.”

⁴¹ Father Doyle told his troops prior to their going over the top at Ypres, Flanders, that: “The man who falls in the charge is not the loser but immensely the gainer, is not the unlucky one but the fortunate and blessed.” He was to add: “You should have seen how the poor chaps drank in every word.” ⁴² Robert Graves alleged that a potential catastrophe was averted during heavy fighting on the Somme in 1916 when men of a Scottish battalion were led back by their priest, a Father McCabe, to positions they had deserted. “They were Glasgow Catholics and would follow a priest where they wouldn’t follow an officer,” he explained. ⁴³ Gaell writes of another priest who, facing almost certain death and with all the other officers in his unit killed, took control and absolved his men. He then told them: “Now, out you go, there’s only one order: take the trench and after that the roll call up above!” The priest then pointed his hand to heaven and led the men over the top to martyrdom, being the first to be killed. ⁴⁴

In the case of Father Doyle, he was to get his wish of dying a ‘martyr’s’ death while doing Sacramental work. “He went forward and back over the battlefield with bullets whining about him, seeking out the dying and kneeling in the mud beside them to give Absolution, watched by his men with reverence and a kind of awe until a shell burst near him and he was killed,” noted one national newspaper. ⁴⁵ However, while Father Doyle’s heroics in the most extreme parts of the battlefield were always likely to generate headlines, it should not be forgotten that for every man in the front-line there were as many more working behind in transport, engineering, planning, cooking and more. The *Catholic Soldiers* report carries numerous instances of the spiritual needs of these men, with one chaplain saying: “One of my battery drivers in a battery wagon lines said: ‘Father, I find if I can go to Mass on Sundays I can keep straight during the week.’” ⁴⁶ Another added: “One morning I went to say Mass and found two gunners sleeping against the chapel door. The two men were Catholics, had seen my notice about daily Mass, and were afraid of oversleeping and knew I would have to rouse them before I could enter.” ⁴⁷ If all of the priests were operating in forward areas who would care for the needs of the large numbers working in less dangerous parts of the battlefield?

iv. Front-line or field ambulance?:

In a study of the history of military chaplaincy, Bergen writes: “Reading the popular literature on chaplains, it is hard to avoid the uncomfortable impression that in order to be considered truly heroic, chaplains have to die.” ⁴⁸ When Father Doyle was killed in 1917, Sergeant Flynn of the Dublin Fusiliers, with whom the chaplain was serving, said in the *Irish News*: “He [Father Doyle]

⁴¹ *Priests in the Firing Line*, Gaell, R., (1916), pp.51-53

⁴² *The Padre of Trench Street...*, O’Rahilly, A., (1920), pp.108 & 52

⁴³ *Goodbye To All That*, Graves, R., (1929), p.276

⁴⁴ *Priests in the Firing Line*, Gaell, R., (1916), p.165

⁴⁵ *The Daily Express*, August 22, 1917

⁴⁶ Plater, C., *Catholic Soldiers*, (Longmans, Green and Co, London, 1919), p.53

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p.52

⁴⁸ *The Sword of the Lord...*, Bergen, D.L., (2004), p.15

was asked not to go into action with the battalion, but he would not stop behind.”⁴⁹ This raises an important point in that the priest had been asked not to go into the forward areas on the day he was killed. If he had listened, he would presumably have been in a position to continue bringing solace to hundreds of men suffering future hardships.

The theme of the best place for a clergyman to serve during an attack is one that was picked up early in the war by the Anglican chaplain Rev Creighton following the death of the first priest in the war; the Catholic Father William Joseph Finn at the Gallipoli landings in 1915. Finn had requested permission from the officer commanding his battalion of the Royal Dublin Fusiliers to be allowed to land on the beach with the men. His officer was said to be very reluctant but finally gave in to Finn's persistence and insistence that his place was beside the dying to provide Absolution. The landing was catastrophic and Father Finn was hit almost immediately, with some reports stating he was killed instantly and others that despite his own wounds he managed to give Absolution to a number of the men around him.⁵⁰ The Rev Creighton was with the same infantry Division as Father Finn and wrote: “I saw the senior chaplain of the division just before we left... his orders are that the chaplains are in no case to go in front of the advanced dressing station. He says they are always anxious to get up to the front, where they can only be of use at one point in the line.” Creighton added: “The chaplain is a non-combatant and surely it must be wrong for him to go out in the attack, much though he may hate not to share the danger of his men to the full.” Nevertheless, he could well see the attraction, conceding that Father Finn was an instance of “the extraordinary hold a chaplain, and perhaps especially an RC, can have on the affections of his men if he absolutely becomes one of them and shares their danger”.⁵¹

As we have seen, bonds grew strong between chaplains and their men and it was often hard for them to resist the temptation to be with 'their boys'; especially when the rise in respect was tangible. Father Day, also serving at Gallipoli, noted that he was treated differently by the men after taking part in an advance. “As I arrived at the hill, I observed the Division lined up. They were cheering lustily and I heard my name shouted. Lord Bentinck called to me: 'The men are cheering you Padre.' From that time onwards I noticed that the troops no longer addressed me as 'Sir' or 'Padre' but as 'Father'. ”⁵² After that Day regularly sought dispensation to accompany the troops into the most dangerous spots. Father Doyle, who had initially been happy to serve outside of the front-line trenches, had later moved full-time to a dug-out in the line, saying: “They [the men] are as proud as punch to have the chaplain with them in the trenches. It is quite amusing to hear them point out my dug-out to strangers as they go by: 'That's our priest'.”⁵³ Father Gill, a senior chaplain, wrote: “I thought it worth the risk to pay a visit to the most advanced line of trenches in order that my influence with the men might be greater. I know that this had excellent results.”⁵⁴

⁴⁹ *Irish News*, August 29, 1917

⁵⁰ Rodge, H., & J., *Helles Landing: Gallipoli*, (Leo Cooper, Barnsley, 2003), pp.134-135

⁵¹ Creighton, Rev O., *With the 29th Division in Gallipoli*, (Longmans, Green & Co, London, 1916), pp.32-33 & 67

⁵² *A Cavalry Chaplain*, Day, H., SJ, MC., (1922), p.135

⁵³ *The Padre of Trench Street...*, O'Rahilly, A., (1920), p.37

⁵⁴ *The 2nd Royal Irish Rifles...*, Taylor, JW., (2005), p.241

The above also fed into the theme of 'them and us' regularly voiced by front-line troops with regard to their counterparts who served out of harm's way. To serve at the sharp-end made you part of a special club who usually looked with disdain on non-members. Monsignor Bickerstaff-Drew, who had seen lots of front-line action in the early stages of the war, wrote in March 1915 of an encounter behind the lines: "I was talking to four naval officers who have all been here since the beginning of the war. They spoke of a young Army Service Corps officer here, and I asked what his work was. 'Oh, seeing hay unloaded from England,' they told me. Then I said tactfully: 'A nice safe way of getting the war medal.' You should have seen those four faces. Of course, they'll all get the medal too." ⁵⁵ In an unusual juxtaposition of male chest beating, front-line snobbery and religious martyrdom, Father Doyle wrote: "The vast majority of the chaplains at the front seldom see anything more dangerous than the shell of an egg of doubtful age... we with the Irish regiments live in the thick of it. We share the hardships and dangers with our men, and if we have less polish on our boots and belts than other spruce padres, let us hope we have something more to our bank account in a better world." ⁵⁶ However, Wilkinson has sympathy with this kind of confusion among chaplains, stating: "Sometimes feeling neither accepted by officers nor by men as a priest, wearied with indifference and misunderstanding, tired of innuendos that if he was a 'real man' he would be fighting, it was tempting (for a chaplain) to try to solve all these tensions by a display of bellicosity." ⁵⁷ Nevertheless, the question remains whether such shows of selflessness or manliness were really the best way for chaplains to serve their flock.

As has already been discussed, many Catholic chaplains saw it as their duty to be in the front-line because of their desire to provide Absolution to the dying, but there are counter arguments. Not all were in agreement that being in a position of danger was the best way to go about getting the Sacraments to the greatest number, in fact there were often "sharp differences of opinion". ⁵⁸ Cardinal Logue of Ireland was one of the more outspoken supporters of front-line representation, saying from as early as October 1914 that: "What we want is that chaplains will be permitted to go to the Front... so that when the poor fellow drops he may have a priest beside him to give him the last consolations of religion." ⁵⁹ Catholic newspaper *The Tablet* was not in agreement with this, retorting that a Catholic chaplain who had been at the Front "from the first" said that every man lived in a hole outside of which nothing could survive. When advances were made the casualties were too high for one man to administer to them all. The conclusion being that it would be foolhardy for the Catholic chaplains to go into combat with the men. ⁶⁰

"The question was how we could be of greatest use to the greatest number of men. It followed that if three regiments were in an attack, being with any one of the three would make it impossible to

⁵⁵ *John Ayscough's Letters...*, Bickerstaffe-Drew, F., (1919), p.92

⁵⁶ *The Padre of Trench Street...*, O'Rahilly, A., (1920), p.50

⁵⁷ *The Church of England...*, Wilkinson, A., (1978), p.152

⁵⁸ Snape, M., 'British Catholicism and the British Army in the First World War', *Recusant History*, Vol.26, No.2, (October 2002), p.338

⁵⁹ *The Cross on the Sword...*, Johnstone, T., and Hagerty, J., (1996), p.88

⁶⁰ *The Tablet*, 7 November 1914, in *The Cross on the Sword...*, Johnstone, T., and Hagerty, J., (1996), p.88

do anything with the other two,” wrote Rev Creighton after the death of Father Finn at Gallipoli.⁶¹ The general principle followed by many was, as such, that the converging point for the majority of wounded men in need of support (rather than a select few out on the battlefield proper) would be the best place to be. This was usually the Advanced Dressing Station. As we have seen, some chaplains actually went over the top with the men, though it was usual for them to station themselves one step behind the front-line at the Regimental Aid Post; the most advanced Red Cross position where the wounded were first brought in by the stretcher bearers before being cleared to the Advanced Dressing Station (ADS). After the ADS the next medical post along the line would be the Casualty Clearing Station (CCS), which was usually in a less vulnerable position in terms of the reach of the enemy guns.

Arguments could be made about the value of being at each medical position, with Father Williamson claiming: “In the CCS perhaps more than anywhere else the full horror of war is brought home to the observer, for while the Regimental Aid Post only gathers in casualties of the regiment, and the Advanced Dressing Station generally only the wounded of one or at most two Brigades, through the CCS stream all the wounded from a whole Corps battle front.”⁶² Prior to the battle of Messines in 1917, Father Gill wrote: “I went to the Advanced Dressing Station where I would have the best chance of finding the wounded... I remained for some hours attending on such wounded as had been brought in. I then set out to follow in the wake of the attack to see what could be done for the wounded on the field.”⁶³ The value of this work soon came to be appreciated, with one army captain telling the *Catholic Soldiers* report that: “In the dressing stations a non-Catholic doctor told me that he found that the first call of the wounded [Catholic] soldier was invariably for his priest.”⁶⁴ An RC chaplain told the same report: “They [the men] want the priest, and feel sure he will know what is best to be done. How many times I have said 'I'm a Catholic priest'. 'Oh Father, I'm so glad you have come.' This so noticeable that doctors in my field ambulance, who at first thought me a hindrance, soon looked on me as a help.”⁶⁵ It is hard to question the value of the work of Father Devas and Father Gray on the Somme in 1916, who did more than offer spiritual comfort. Devas stationed himself at the Advanced Dressing Station and helped where ever he could, saying: “The place was a shambles, full of wounded, with stretcher cases lying in the open outside, and all through the night the stream of stricken humanity flowed unceasingly...” Gray spent four days and nights dressing the wounded and providing spiritual comfort. In the end, not having had any sleep, he became hysterical.⁶⁶ This is in contrast to Father O'Sullivan who was also on the Somme at the same time and, after initially being refused permission to accompany his flock over the top, was finally granted permission to accompany the men into battle after telling his commanding officer that it was a necessity for a Catholic priest to be on hand to provide the Sacraments to the dying. O'Sullivan was

⁶¹ *With the 29th Division...*, Creighton, Rev O., (1916), pp.32-33

⁶² *Happy Days...*, Williamson, B., (1920), p.7

⁶³ *The 2nd Royal Irish Rifles...*, Taylor, JW., (2005), pp.95-97

⁶⁴ *Catholic Soldiers*, Plater, C., (1919), p.117

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, p.107

⁶⁶ *The Cross on the Sword...*, Johnstone, T., and Hagerty, J., (1996), pp.132 & 138

subsequently killed by German shell fire.

The senior Catholic chaplain Father Gill always remained clear about where the clergy under his leadership could be of most use, writing in 1918: “Shortly before the attack I felt it my duty to make arrangements with the other chaplains as to the best positions to take up. It was quite clear to me that anyone who might happen to be in the front-line when the attack took place would never get back alive. The chaplain's duty was with the Brigade as a whole and he therefore had to make arrangements so as to avoid being killed without necessity.”⁶⁷ It was an edict that would ultimately come from the very top of the Catholic Army Chaplaincy service from a priest who had extensive experience of working in the firing line.

The Benedictine Father Stephen Rawlinson was one of the first Catholic priests to volunteer for overseas service and was rapidly sent as the chaplain to the 2nd Battalion of the Royal Irish. A veteran of the Boer War, he saw front-line action in the initial engagements faced by the British Expeditionary Force on the Western Front in 1914 and made such an impression on those around him that he was named assistant to the Senior RC Chaplain in 1915. His appointment was over the heads of more senior clergy and less than a year later he had been promoted further: to the role of Senior Catholic Chaplain to the British Army on the Western Front and Assistant Principal Chaplain for all religious denominations. Father Rawlinson issued new guidelines and instructions for chaplains covering everything from military organization to the chaplains' responsibilities to their men. While accepting that military chaplains needed to visit the men in the trenches and that the men had a right to the Sacraments in situations of danger, he could not have been clearer in stating that a chaplain “must take all possible care not to expose himself needlessly and should get to know particularly dangerous spots. He should remember that one live chaplain is worth more than 50 dead ones”.⁶⁸ Father Rawlinson was not an advocate of martyrdom.

v. Conclusion:

There were a large number of factors that influenced the decision of Catholic chaplains to place themselves to the fore and often go 'over the top' with their military flock, however, in many instances the same influences, pressures and temptations were shared by chaplains of all denominations. Nevertheless, the more advanced role of the French and Belgian priests may have been particularly influential on their co-religionists, not least as a result of the expectation levels created by the popular Catholic press at home. Claims of a greater affinity for the military life among the celibate Catholic chaplains over their counterparts of other faiths are hard to substantiate and it is hard to disagree with Loudén's claim that all Great War chaplains constantly “conformed” to the Army way as there was simply no other way to get the best out of the situation.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ *The 2nd Royal Irish Rifles...*, Taylor, JW., (2005), pp.115

⁶⁸ Hagerty, J., 'Benedictine Military Chaplains in the First World War', (a paper presented to the English Benedictine Congregation History Commission Symposium, 1998)

⁶⁹ *Chaplains in Conflict...*, Loudén, S., (1996), p.32

What was perhaps more influential on Catholic chaplains was a “culture that emphasised the nobility of suffering”,⁷⁰ although it is necessary to be mindful of generalisations: the famous Anglican chaplain Rev Studdert-Kennedy always told new C of E chaplains on arrival in France that they should make a point of working in the front areas, adding: “The more padres die doing Christ-like deeds, the better for the church.”⁷¹ Still, what was undeniably unique to the Catholic experience, and is now well-established as a key motivational factor for RC chaplains, was the importance of delivering the Sacraments. Whether or not these chaplains were acting in the best interests of the majority of their flock by placing themselves in positions of danger in a bid to deliver the Sacraments is a far more difficult issue to resolve.

⁷⁰ *The Cross and the Trenches...*, Schweitzer, R., (2003), p.169

⁷¹ *The Sword of the Lord...*, Bergen, D.L., (2004), p.15

CONCLUSION

The Roman Catholic Church and its adherents were faced with a number of complex problems on the outbreak of the Great War. Many Catholics were forced to make difficult choices between their duty to the Holy See, which was committed to international peace, and the more aggressive demands of their nation States. In the majority of cases Catholics appear to have chosen to show loyalty to their national flag, and it is worth noting that the Vatican, while remaining committed to its stance of neutrality, never criticised them for doing so. In the case of the French clergy Rome even changed its rules about the roles of clerics in the Armed Forces in a bid to save them from being compromised as a result of the Republic's more forthright demands about clergy sharing in active military duties.

In Britain, where many diocese were reliant on Continental priests to make up their numbers (including Germans and Austrians) there does not appear to have been any reticence in supporting the national cause. Cardinal Bourne and most of his bishops were clearly proud of the willingness of their flock to fight, and some, such as Father Bernard Vaughan, even went on to become leading and controversial lights in military recruitment drives. The evidence does, therefore, appear to suggest that Wilkinson was misplaced in his claim that senior Catholic churchmen in Britain were not as vocal in their support of the war as their Anglican counterparts.¹ If anything, Mews seems closer to the truth in stating that British Catholics were generally more pro-active than their foreign counterparts in their desire to prove themselves in tune and loyal to the national mood.²

When it came to justification for war, Catholics were clearly influenced by the huge influx of refugees arriving from Belgium and the horror stories printed in the Catholic press about the German invaders. Furthermore, many Catholic priests who went on to serve in the Forces had felt personal pain at the Kaiser's army's razing of the Belgian city of Louvain, where large numbers of them had trained for ordination. It is interesting to note that many Catholic publications blamed this "barbarism" on Protestant German soldiers, indicating that despite national sympathies the internationalism of the Catholic faith still exerted an influence. Indeed, the evidence of this dissertation supports Snape's assertions that Catholic combatants were often prepared to show respect and leniency for their co-religionists serving on the opposite side of no-man's land.³ As an addendum, the research undertaken for this project also suggests that it needs to be recognised that such mutual respect was often more forthcoming from British chaplains than their French counterparts; with the latter often showing far more belligerence towards an enemy that was encamped on their home soil.

On the issue of geography, there can be little argument with the claim of the likes of the Methodist minister Rider that the Catholic bias of the local population on the Western Front, and the

¹ Wilkinson, A., *The Church of England and the First World War*, (SPCK London, 1978), p.2

² Mews, S., *The Effects of the First World War on English Religious Life*, (MA Thesis, University of Leeds, 1967), p.132

³ Snape, M., *God and the British Soldier: Religion and the British Army in the First and Second World Wars*, (Routledge London, 2005), p.191

infrastructure that was tied to it, provided the RC chaplains with an advantage over their fellow religionists.⁴ In fact Wilkinson has a good argument in claiming that the near-omnipotence of Catholic symbolism on the European battlefields was sure to have a “novel” effect on the majority of the British soldiers who had never come into contact with the faith before.⁵

Whether the class or social backgrounds of the Catholic clergy was also “novel” to the troops is a more controversial issue. The majority of academics writing about religion and the Great War have consistently claimed that the Catholic chaplains not only had more experience of working with the poorer classes but often came from the working classes themselves. It is undoubtedly true that the Catholic Church in Britain had a longer tradition of social, or slum, ministry and that many clergy could trace their roots back to less-affluent families. Nevertheless, even limited studies by the likes of Davies⁶ and this author suggest that it is dangerous to make sweeping judgements about the social class of the Catholic chaplains. Many of the most widely available memoirs by Catholic chaplains who served in the war come from men who were clearly from privileged backgrounds. Memoirs have, of course, traditionally been written by people from the middle or upper classes, but even if such men were a minority among the ranks of the Catholic chaplains they were still there and playing an important role. Also, many of these men went on to win plaudits for their ministry and to gain medals for bravery, suggesting that class was irrelevant to both their worth as men of God and as members of the military machine.

The inference of previous work in this area is that working-class chaplains were at an advantage because most of the troops were working class. While it is true that the majority of the infantry were from poorer communities, it should not be forgotten that the army of the Great War crossed social divides, not least with the advent of the service or 'pals' battalions aimed at boosting levels of volunteering among the middle classes. Loudon is surely right in his claim that “chaplains are commissioned officers and closely identify with that group both by inclination and status”.⁷ Quite simply, chaplains of all faiths would generally spend more time in the company of their fellow officers (most of whom would be from the middle and upper classes). In addition, if they wanted to gain favours, such as permission to move more freely among the men and at the sharp-end of the battlefield they would need to be on good terms with their fellow officers. A cursory look at the public school lists of the time shows that this would not have been such an onerous task for many of the Catholic chaplains or the men they were serving: significant numbers of whom were also often from Catholic public school backgrounds and 'the officer class'. While it is accepted that the evidence presented in relation to class is not without its limitations, I would argue that there is enough material to suggest that common assumptions about the backgrounds of the RC chaplains

⁴ Rider, R.J., *Reflections on the Battlefield: From Infantryman to Chaplain 1914-1919*, Robinson, A, and Hair, P., (eds), (Liverpool University Press, 2001)

⁵ *The Church of England...*, Wilkinson, A., (1978), p.133

⁶ Davies, J., 'Catholic Families Produce Catholic Priests: Roman Catholic priests, social class and family background in the late 19th and early 20th centuries', (paper presented to a joint conference of the Preston branch of the Institute of Local and Family History and the *North West Catholic History Society*, Saturday, November 20, 2010, University of Central Lancashire, UK)

⁷ Loudon, S., *Chaplains in Conflict: The Role of Army Chaplains Since 1914*, (Avon Books, London, 1996), p.1 intro

need to be re-evaluated. I believe that the 'working-class' label so liberally applied to the Catholic chaplains is not only wrong but misleading in terms of the wider legacy of the church during the war.

When talking about class and the Catholic experience during the conflict it is impossible to ignore the influence of Irish immigration. However, as Moynihan's claims about the "exception" of the well-educated and middle-class Father William Doyle showed, it is again highly dangerous to make generalisations about Irish Catholics (many of whom had already achieved "respectability" by 1914) and their Irish-born chaplains.⁸ An important point also comes to the fore when talking about ethnicity, with many works that have looked at Catholicism and the Great War focusing on the sectarian Irish Catholic battalions. While works on the Irish battalions are of obvious interest, academics should be careful to ensure that such studies are not seen as being wholly representative of the general Catholic experience. This is important as they are in danger of ignoring the voices of large numbers of chaplains who were not linked to such battalions and whose experiences may have played just as significant a role in raising the profile of their faith courtesy of their high visibility around the troops (both in and out of the line) during their seemingly endless search for a flock. Also, the Irish-born proportion of the British Army declined after 1916, not least because of the fact that conscription was never implemented in Ireland.

Claims that the Catholic chaplains were more willing to spend time in the front-line sharing in the hardships of the men have also become a common form of academic currency. It is difficult to substantiate suggestions that Catholic chaplains were more often in positions of danger than their counterparts and it is questionable whether the claims of popular contemporary writers about the superiority of the Catholic chaplains should be given as much credence as they often are: the likes of Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon partook in high-profile clashes with 'the establishment' both during and after the war and may well have had an agenda to bruise the Anglican faith as a leading part of that self-same establishment. Nevertheless, the fact remains that many Catholic chaplains did see it as their duty to be as near to the front-line as they could. The principle argument for this has already been convincingly made and most recently revisited by Rafferty: this being that the main motivation for the Catholic chaplains to be in forward areas was to be able to deliver the Sacraments.

⁹ This was certainly a unique element to the role of the Catholic chaplains and, as Wilkinson has stated, enabled them to rely on their role as a priest in a way "which was not possible for the Anglican chaplain".¹⁰ While I would not dispute this, I believe that the issue of front-line service is a complex one and that the motivation behind the RC chaplains' actions may at times have been as much human as spiritual. This is of particular relevance when we look at actions of apparent martyrdom among some RC clerics. Far more material would need to be produced to show such acts as being representative of a common trend, but the fact remains that many priests did go into areas of extreme risk despite the warning of their superiors to avoid putting their lives in needless danger.

⁸ Moynihan, M., *God On Our Side: The British Padres in World War I*, (Leo Cooper, London, 1983), p.175

⁹ Rafferty, O., 'Catholic Chaplains to the British Forces in the First World War', *Religion, State & Society*, Vol.39, No.1, (Routledge, March 2011), p.35

¹⁰ *The Church of England...*, Wilkinson, A., (1978), p.134

Sometimes this may have been about the chaplains proving themselves worthy of their God, and at other times it was undoubtedly about winning respect from their peers and a need (within their own psyche) to prove themselves as 'real men'. My research suggests that the example set by the French and Belgian priests, who were often serving in more hands-on roles within their own military machines, could be far more important to the front-line debate than has previously been credited. It is hoped that future academic research into the relationship between the Continental RC chaplains and their British equivalents may shed more light on this issue.

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